WESTERN ACTION

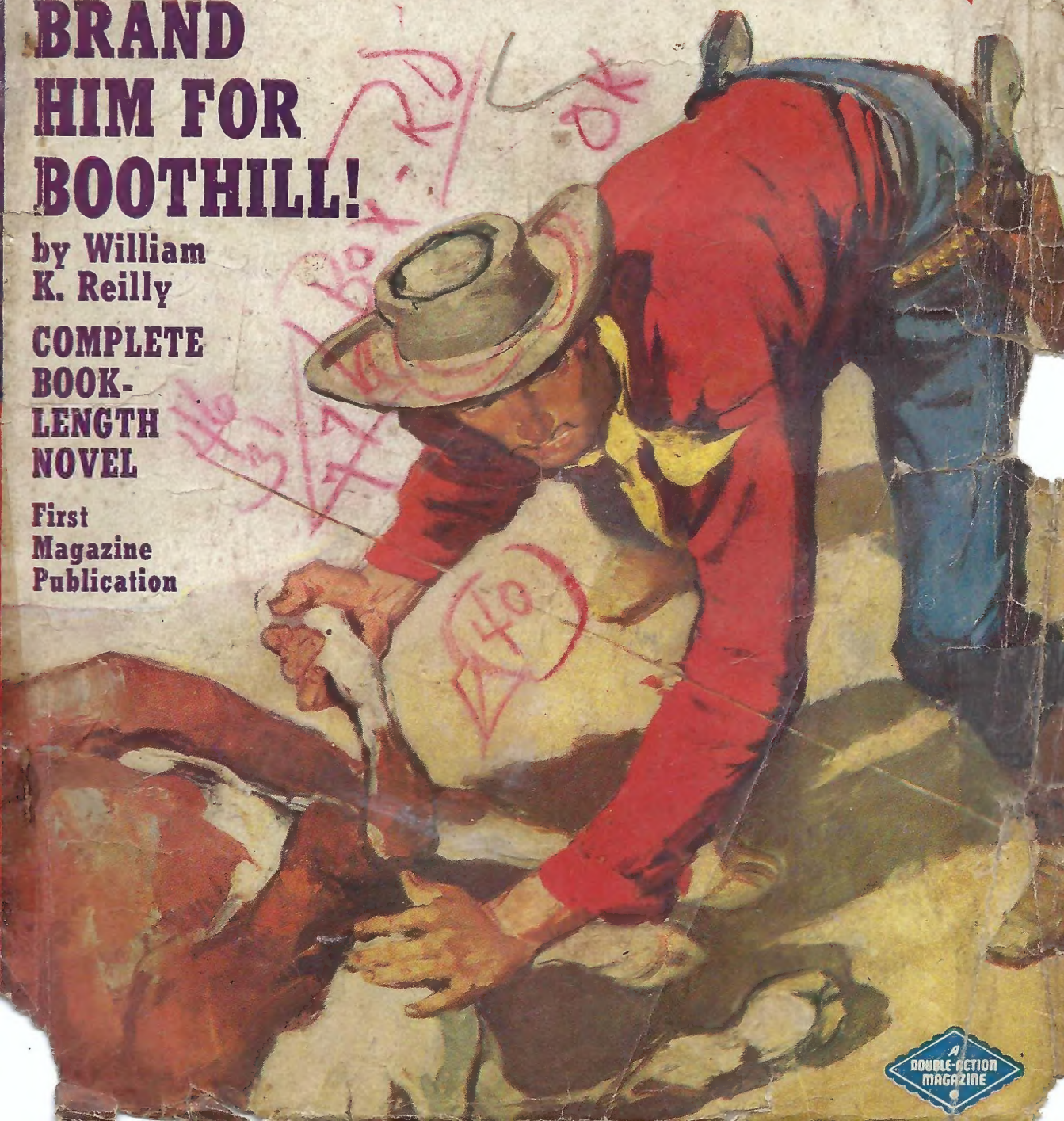
JULY
15¢

BRAND HIM FOR BOOTHILL!

by William K. Reilly

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

First Magazine Publication



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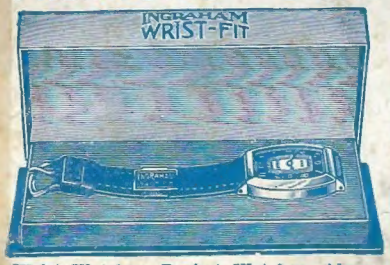

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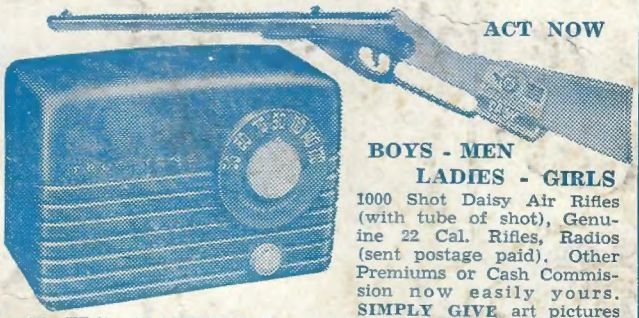

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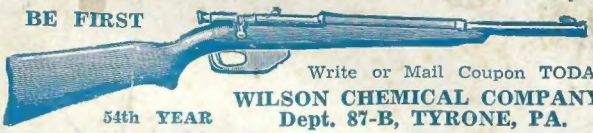

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WESTERN ACTION

VOLUME 13 July, 1949 NUMBER 5

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

Brand Him For Boothill!

by WILLIAM K. REILLY 6

The Kennedy brothers knew that this pilgrim Johnny Digby, and his sister, Stella, were a haunted pair, fleeing from something in their past they dared not name. But it was just as plain that these two were straight-shooters, and loyal friends would be needed in the powdersmoke trouble cooked up by Black's outlaws. So they didn't give a hoot in hell what the townsfolks thought; they'd help the Digby pair!

PLUS

THE LAST BAD MAN ..... Rex Whitechurch 95

A true story of one of the strangest holdup men in the old West.

FINIS .... Kacey Sensabaugh 98

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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Brand Him For Boothill

by WILLIAM K. REILLY

Complete Book - Length Novel

First Magazine Publication

Orella had managed to hold off the outlaws.

They were an easy-going lot, these Kennedy's, and they knew that this pilgrim and his sister were holding something back from them. But they knew when a man was square, and they'd side him through any trouble on his back-trail!

"OH, SURE, sure," said Dando, dipping a glass in a pail of murky-looking water, and wiping it round with a cloth that had seen cleaner days. "Sure, you'd get a square deal out've the Lazy-K if yuh get any deal at all, stranger. Fact is, most all've the outfits around here are mighty full've riders. Don't yuh think I'm sayin' so t'discourage yuh, stranger—yuh ride out to the Lazy—K an' mebbe the other places, an' see if there's hire fer yuh. Only don't blame me if you're unlucky."

"I will say," said the tall, freckle-faced man leaning against the bar and looking not at Dando, but at his own

reflection in the long, narrow mirror behind the bar-keep, "that yuh're bein' most helpful, fella."

"Oh, sure, sure," said Dando, tall and bald and with a face set in such perpetual gloom that wrinkles had formed in the hundreds before their time. "Sure, I don' mind helpin' where I can, stranger, only I guess there ain't much help in Blue Clay 'cept for them that helps theirselves. An' there's plenty've them, I guess."

It wanted an hour or more to noon, and Blue Clay was not yet in the mood for drinking or eating. Three or four men lounged by the open door, which looked out onto the wide and dusty main street. A medley of sounds came from outside, women's voices not the least of them. Now and again a rider or two rode along, at a steady pace. Twice a two-wheeled wagon with a family inside, bowled by, and words of greeting were flung hither and thither.

"If yuh're thirsty, stranger, I could see yuh to a drink."

"Thanks." The stranger's voice was laconic. "Me an' drinkin' don't get together until after sun-down, I guess."

"It won't cost yuh none," said Dando earnestly. Once he had bought the other a drink he could ask questions freely.

"It wouldn't haff to," said the stranger frankly. "Only I'm not that dry yet."

"Oh, sure, sure," said Dando hastily. "I was only askin'."

He made a great fuss with his glasses, but stopped when a sound of galloping hoofs reached the big saloon. The loungers also raised their heads, and the stranger reflected thoughtfully that it was the first suggestion of activity he had come across in Blue Clav. He, too, watched the doorway, and in a few seconds three riders flashed by. They were going at speed, but not fast enough to stop the stranger from seeing that they rode good quality horses with ease and abandon—nor fast enough to stop him from seeing that all three riders were smiling, showing very white teeth, and all looking remarkably alike.

"Well, I'll go an' eat alligators," said Dando impressively.

"For why? Are you feelin' hungry?" demanded the freckled man; Dando regarded him reproachfully, pulling his lips down in a way that created a dozen more lines. "Na-ow, stranger, yuh doan have to get on t'me that way. I guess I got a right t'be surprised, ain't I?"

"Yuh've got the right t'be all yuh feel like, as far's I'm concerned," said the stranger.

"Well, s'long's I know," said Dando. He lapsed into silence for some minutes, and during that time the galloping horses had come to a standstill not far along the main street. Dando shot a dozen quick glances toward the freckled one, and then went on: "I guess yuh're in luck, mister. You won' have t'ride out to the Lazy-K t'be told there ain't no hire there. I guess them three was the Kennedy's. Sure's yuh're here, they'll be lookin' in afore they leave town. Seemed in a mighty hurry, I guess. Looks t'me as if they reckon if they ride fast ernough they'll catch up with the time lost by their ole man."

"Meanin?"

"Me, I ain't sayin' nuthin," said Dando vigorously. "I was just thinkin' thoughts aloud, mister."

* * *

THE THREE horses which had passed at such speed were tied to a rail most of a hundred yards away from Lecky's saloon, in which Dando kept the bar. Two and three-storied buildings, most of them in need of new paint, lined the Main Street, three hanging out "Hotel" boards that kept motionless and were peeling a little, as if they, too, gasped for water and coolness. A variety of other signs in a diveristy of colors, but all weather-beaten until they looked tired, stuck from the buildings. The stranger saw three banks; the sheriff's office; two dozen or more store signs; three invitations to play pool in the best parlor in Texas; two lawyers' ofoffices; some real estate signs and a variety of other things which told him what he already suspected—Blue Clay was a sizeable and thriving

township, in spite of the barkeep's gloomy prognostications.

He pulled his Stetson well down over his eyes as he regarded the three horses. One was a piebald, another a rangy gray, the third a chestnut. All looked young and in fine fettle; all had buckets of water in front of them. They were outside a building which was marked: *"For Security—Bank with Johnson."*

No more than five minutes passed before the trio of riders came out. They turned toward Lecky's, although they were on the other side of the street. The likeness that the stranger had caught in his first fleeting glance was the more remarkable now that they were coming at walking pace, and full-faced toward him. There was another surprising thing, too. The one in the middle was half a head taller than those on either side, who were apparently of a height. And all three dressed so much the same that it would not be easy to tell them apart in their dress.

All three walked as if they had no care in the world.

The stranger watched them with a hint of anxiety in his eyes, although few people would have noticed it. Not until they were almost opposite Lecky's did they step across the road, and he drew a deep breath and walked back lazily into the saloon. Soon afterwards the three shadows darkened the doorway.

"We-ell, I'll eat alligators" exclaimed Dando, and something like a smile enlivened his gloomy countenance. "If it ain't the Kennedy family in pusson! How're yuh, Jim an' Dan an' Bry? Havin' the usual?"

"I'll be jiggered," drawled the tallest of the trio, "if it ain't Dando bein' surprised t'see us again, an' bein' so blind he missed us ridin by. Yuh'll have to get spectacles fer them pretty eyes of yuhrn, Dando."

"Oh, sure, sure," said Dando, and whisked a bottle from the shelf behind him and three glasses from the serried rows he had finished cleaning. "Sure, Jim." He poured small portions of rye whiskey and slid them toward the trio. "Gets warm, don't it?"

"Can't say I'd noticed," said the Kennedy on Jim's right.

"Can't understand yuh town fellas," drawled the Kennedy on Jim's left. "If it ain't too hot it's too cold; an' if it ain't neither it's rainin' too much or there ain't ernough rain"

"Bry," said Jim Kennedy, "I guess I'm ashamed've yuh, making a laugh out've an old-timer like Dando. Help yuhself, Dando. And what's all of the news?"

"We-ell," said Dando, helping with alacrity, "I guess there ain't none much. Mrs. Marsh, she's just had her seventh—"

"Remember the youth of my brothers," said Jim Kennedy in a tone of reproach.

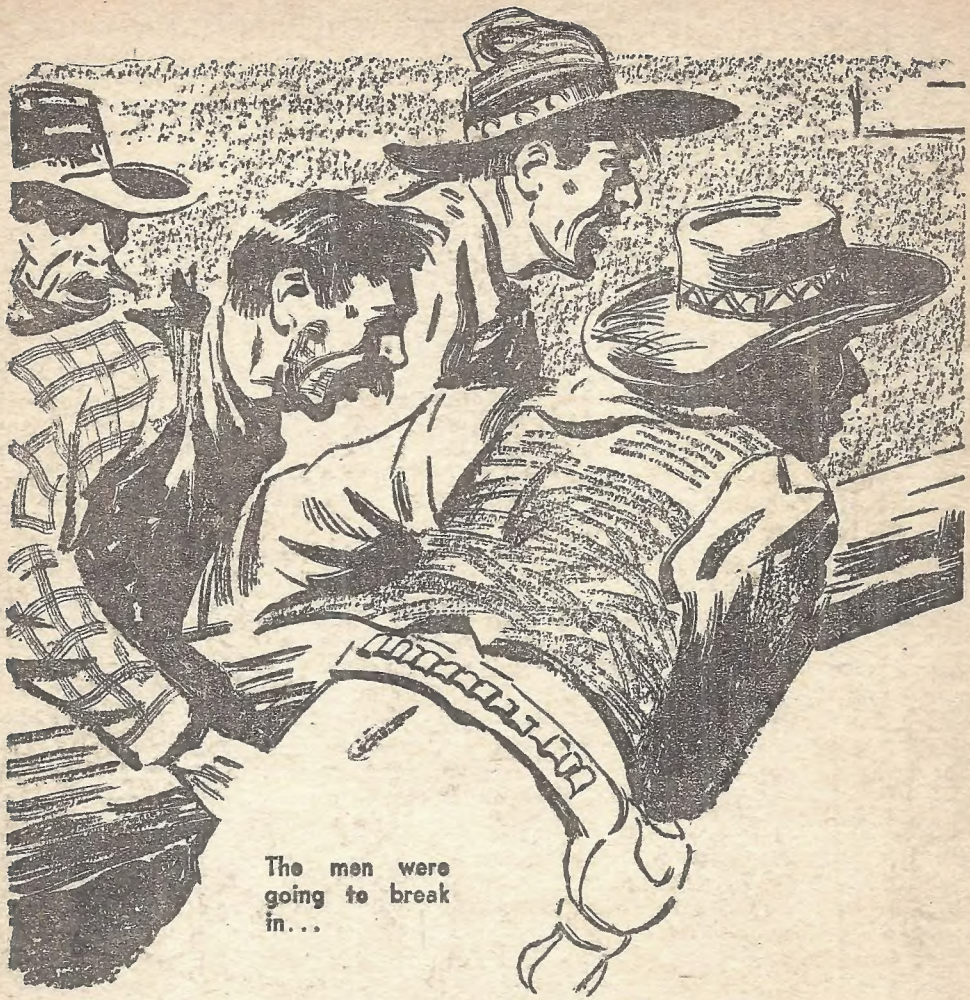
Dando grinned, and drank.

The stranger was looking at the tall man, whom he could now identify as Jim Kennedy, almost with anxiety. He saw something that it was good to see. Tall as he was, Jim's shoulders were powerful enough to make him seem a normal size, and his clean-cut face, tanned a deep brown, had lines of strength and handsomeness. Their profiles, the stranger could see, were different in only one respect. The chins were well forward, the lips full but well shaped, the foreheads high enough and the eyes large and deep-set. But the tallest man's nose was straight and short by comparison with the others, which had high bridges, and were long.

"Yuh stayin' long?" asked Dando; his eyes darted for a moment toward the freckled one, and then away.

"Nope," said Jim Kennedy. "We aim t'hit the ranch by sun-down, an' that doan mean waitin' long around here with yuh lazy an' pessimistic scallywags that call yuhselves citizens of this one-eyed township that ought t'be pulled down afore it's built up again." The words were drawled, and halfway through them Kennedy turned his head enough to see where Dando had been looking. He nodded faintly to the stranger, and said: "Would yuh care t'drink with us, stranger?"

"I guess—" The freckled one hesitated, and then stood up. "Yuh'll excuse me, I'm hopin'; me'n drink doan go together until after sun-down.



The men were going to break in...

Yuh're Jim Kennedy, of the Lazy-K?"

"That's so," said Kennedy.

"Can—can I have a word with yuh?"

"That's easy," Kennedy said. "Yuh'n me are both here. Shoot while the chance is as good's it is now."

THE STRANGER hestitated, nevertheless, and Dando coughed. "I bin tellin' him, Jim, that there wasn't no chance of hire on the Lazy-K. It's too far from the fall round-up, an' I was advisin' him not t'waste his time an' his bronc's. An' I was tellin' him also that yuh've got more men on yuhr payroll than yuh need, an' there ain't room fer another in yuhr bunkhouses. I guess he's mighty obstinate, or he'd have remembered all've that."

"Mebbe yuh didn't say it convincin'," drawled Kennedy.

"I—I hope that's not all true", said the freckled one quickly, and Jim Kennedy saw the nervousness that was in him. "I've been to every other outfit, and they've said no. I—I could do with hire mighty bad."

"Where're yuh from?" said Kennedy.

"Further east," came the answer, so quickly that it seemed to come with a rush—and made it suspect. Kennedy's eyes, as well as his brothers', narrowed just enough to show that they realized it, while the other went on quickly, as if to try to slide over an awkward moment: "I've been ridin'

the range since I was a kid, an' I doan reckon you'll find me wantin'. My name's Digby. Only—" He hesitated for a moment, and then went on with a rush: "Only where there's hire fer me there has t'be room fer my sister, Mr. Kennedy."

Jim's eyes widened. "An' where's she?"

"Up-trail. There's an old shack there I've been usin' fer the last two-three weeks."

"We-ell, I'll eat alligators!" exclaimed Dando.

"Yuhr hide's tougher than one," said Kennedy, and there was a touch of acerbity in his voice. "Maybe I can use yuh, Digby. An' I guess there's room fer a woman in the Lazy-K for a while at least. If the shack yuh mean is the one I'm thinkin' of it's no place fer a man, never mind a woman. D'yuh know the trail?"

"Why, surely. An' I'm thankin' yuh a mighty lot—" The relief in Digby's voice was there for them all to understand, and his smile was eager and grateful.

"There's no call for thanks," said Jim Kennedy. "I guess there's always

room fer a rider, if he's up to his job. The two've yuh c'n ride in tomorrow. I'll see yuh then."

2

BRYAN and Daniel Kennedy were twins of twenty-three at the time that their brother offered hire to the stranger who called himself Digby. Jim Kennedy was seven years older, although it was said that of the trio Dan had the oldest head. That was doubtful, and he disclaimed it, saying that Jim managed the Lazy-K outfit and that they worked only on his instructions. In addition to the three brothers at the Lazy-K there were the old folks, Graham and Miriam Kennedy, and Sue, who had been born between Jim and the twins, and at twenty-four was adored by the brothers even though none would have put it into words.

No one could claim that Graham Kennedy was a brilliant man. Sound, yes, and solid—and as upright as a pine tree, and there were few better judges of horseflesh or beeves in Texas. But there was a touch of laziness in the old man: there had always been, and his wife had provided the family energy, particularly in the early days of the 'twenties, when the Kennedys had hit Blue Clay, then no more than a scattered collection of huts serving a small blue clay diggings which promised far more diamonds than it ever yielded.

The touch of laziness or slowness had missed Jim, Dan and Sue Kennedy, but was seen at times in Bry, who was apt to dream too much and forget what he was doing. But as they rode out of Blue Clay, fast and with sheer enjoyment in riding, Bry said sarcastically: "Mebbe I'm dreamy at times, Jim, but I reckon I don't take the long trail 'stead of the short one when I'm in a hurry, an' I reckon I wouldn't hire no man who lied 'bout where he came from. What's happenin' to yuh? Goin' soft?"

Jim grinned lazily. "Call it that, an' yuh want to. An' I took this trail for the want of it Bry."

"An' yuh said yuh was aimin' to hit the ranch afore sun-down," broke in Dan.

"If yuh two c'n ride the way yuh ought, we will," said Jim. "I'm ridin' fer that shack," he added almost casually.

His brothers, riding on either side of him stared. "Fer *where?*" demanded Dan.

"An' fer why?" said Bry.

"Fer the reason I don't like t'think of that woman at the shack on her own," said Jim, still casually. "An' I guess I'd like t'see her before she rides in. An' also," he added with exaggerated carelessness, "I heard-say this mornin' in the hearin' of yuh two fellas that Black's on the range again."

The faces of the two changed expression.

"I fergot," admitted Dan.

"I didn't think," said Bry.

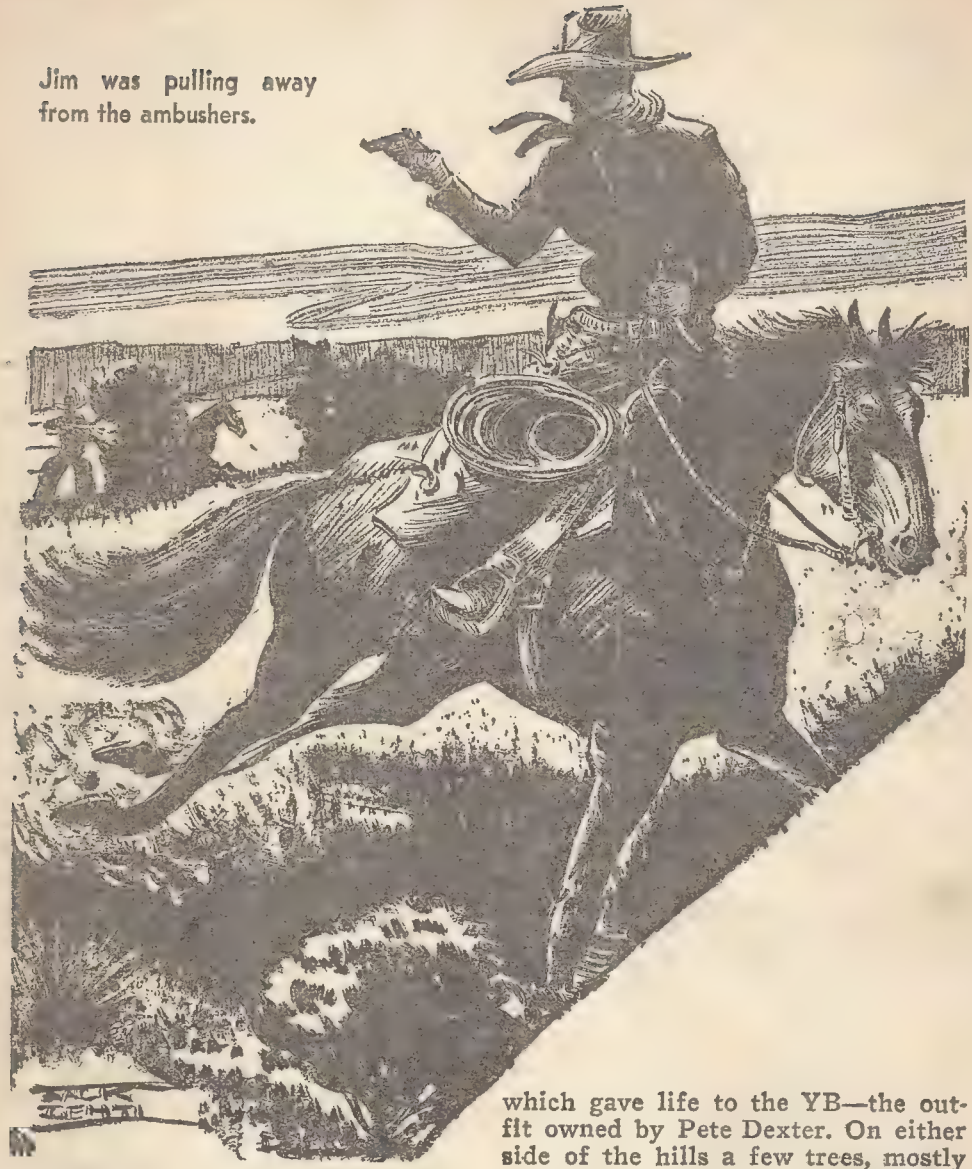
"The trouble with the two've yuh," said Jim, "is that yuh don't let yuhr mind work the way that nature intended. Black may be a take-an'-run rustler who ain't worth much thinkin' about, but I reckon he's a no-good *hombre* an' I wouldn't like t'be the woman that was met by him on her own."

"Why'n't yuh tell Digby?" asked Dan.

"Fer the reason I didn't want t'throw a scare into him. T'me he looked worried enough as it is, an' I see no call fer addin' to any man's worries. What're yuh hurryin' fer, Bry?"

Bryan, forging ahead on the spirited piebald pony that he had ridden for years, called over his shoulder: "My mind's workin' the way it was intended, an' I don't see no call fer riddin' slow when Black might be at that shack now fer all yuh know. Why'n't yuh talk about this before?"

Jim grinned, and relapsed into silence as they quickened the pace of the horses. The three rode in the same easy fashion, and the flanks of all three horses were clear of rowel marks. That was understandable, see-



Jim was pulling away from the ambushers.

ing that all three had been taught to sit in the saddle by Nevada Bill, who claimed the man who needed to use spurs to make his horse go faster deserved no horse to ride.

They were out of sight of Blue Clay, then.

The township nestled in a shallow valley between the hills that at no time reached any great heights, and were glass-clad to their summits. A few sleek YB cattle grazed on the slopes, and at the foot of the hill on the other side was a narrow stream which gave life to the YB—the outfit owned by Pete Dexter. On either side of the hills a few trees, mostly juniper and dwarf oak, spread shade from the burning sun; beneath each little cluster cows gathered for the coolness, swishing their tails against the swarming flies that covered their hides.

THE OLD shack that Digby had mentioned was some ten miles out of Blue Clay. Five miles out they passed a small shed with some of its wooden planks falling in. It was used by Dexter for branding and sometimes for stores, but was only

regularly occupied in the dry season, when YB beeves were crowded toward that part of the river.

Approaching it, Jim *yip-peed*. There was no reply, and they rode past without stopping. Two miles farther on, where the trail was flat and the rolling grassland on either side was already showing sere and yellow because of the advancing summer, they saw a rider well to the right of them. Faintly to their ears came a call: *"Hi, yuh, there!"*

"Who's that?" asked Bry.

Jim, slackening pace, shaded his eyes as he looked. "Seems t'me like Mesa Joe. We'll wait fer him."

The solitary rider, seeing that they had slowed down, came toward them at a good speed, and as he drew nearer they could see his flowing gray beard, and closer still the wizened face like an old apple, with the piercing light blue eyes. They knew him as one of Pete Dexter's riders, and a man they would always be ready to shake hands with. He drew alongside, wiping his beard away from his lips, the better to speak. Some said he would never see seventy again, and to look at him then suggested that they were right.

"Howdy, all've yuh," said Mesa in a voice that had lost none of its depth, "How come yuh're on this trail?"

"Fer reasons," smiled Jim.

"Huh. I guess if yuh don't aim t'tell nuthin' I can say will make yuh," said Mesa gruffly. "But I reckon yuh've heerd."

"Heerd what?" asked Jim. They had started to ride again toward the old shack, some two miles away at that spot.

"Black's on the trail," said Mesa. "I guess the day'll come when that coyote is strung up on a tree where he berlongs." He spat toward the trail disgustedly, and as if by accident fingered his right-hand gun. "Why in hell he don't never come within gunshot I don't know."

"Mebbe he knows yuh might hit him," grinned Bry.

"Yuh young fellas ought t'have more respeck fer yuhr elders," growled Mesa, and there was no smile in his eyes. They knew that was because he was worried, and to Jim Kennedy it was surprising; Mesa Joe was not a man to worry easily. "I doan like the idee've Black on the trail this time've year."

Jim nodded. "It's unusual. How many's he got ridin'?

"I ain't guessin'. Three-four I've seen, too far away fer hittin' 'cept with a Winchester, an' I weren't carryin' none."

"Lost any beeves?" asked Dan, whose chestnut was trying to get ahead faster, as if it resented the slowing down.

"Five-six," grunted Mesa.

"Is Pete organizin' a hunt?"

"I doan aim t'know. I ain't seen him since three-four days back, when he rode into Austin. I guess me'n the others will hunt without bein' org'nized, Jim. Yuh seen any sign've the coyote?"

"Nope. Johnson was sayin' he'd been seen around the hills, an' fer that reason we're ridin' the long way round t'take a look-see," said Jim mendaciously. "Yuh ridin' back to the YB?"

"I guess not. As yuh pass, yuh c'n tell Guess fer me that Black was seen early this mornin'. I'm ridin' back to the hill camp, where three-four of the others are waitin'. That okay by yuh?"

"We'll tell Guess," promised Jim.

Mesa Joe nodded, and raised a hand, then turned his bronc so that he rode back in the direction from which he had come.

THERE WAS a slight rise in the trail ahead of the others, and when they reached the brow they would be able to see the shack, they knew. All three quickened their pace, thinking of the man named Black.

He had lived in Blue Clay for years, until he had been caught in horse-thieving, and escaped from lynching by good luck and friends who had not given his whereabouts away. That had been ten years before, and it was known that he had crossed the border into Mexico, going by way of the Davis Mounts. But from time

to time he had returned, using his knowledge of the country and the ranges to rustle beeves, sometimes in ones and twos, sometimes in small bunches, when he had followers enough to take the chance.

Black had not shown up for two years. Now that he was back it might mean a season of trouble, and none of the Kennedys liked the idea of it.

None of them spoke until they reached the brow of the hill, and they reached it together; then Jim's gray went forward like a streak, outdistancing the chestnut and the piebald, while those two felt the unusual weight of their riders' hands on their rumps.

And with good reason.

The shack, a broken-down place which had once been used by a prospector but not lived in except by hoboes for years, was surrounded by horses. "Surrounded" is a big word, but at least there were horses on three sides of it—five in all. No men were in sight, but floating toward the Kennedys was a woman's voice, raised as if in fear.

"No—no!"

And on the faces of the three brothers there was darkness and anger as they raced toward the shack.

3

THEIR approach would be heard; they knew that and yet did nothing to try to silence it, for there was no telling what was happening inside the shack. They had most of a quarter of a mile to go, and Jim flashed a gun belt, preparing to fire it into the air to make sure that the men inside heard them coming.

Before he fired, a shot came from the shack.

It did not come toward them, but was fired inside—and fast upon it came the vicious oath of a man. Jim pulled his trigger, and his brothers did likewise. Bullets went harmlessly toward the skies, and the five horses about the shack began to rear. Fast upon it four men came into sight, and the shooting started.

The Kennedys saw Black.

It had never been known whether it was his real name, or given him because of the blackness of his hair—not only about his head, and his beard, but growing on the backs of his hands and fingers in a thick mat. They were not thinking of that then, for they spread out swiftly, shooting as they thundered down on the shack. The four men from it forked leather as they returned the fire, their bullets going wide—and for that matter the Kennedys made no hit. There was never any question of Black standing to it and making a fight; they saw his huge figure sway in the saddle as he swung his bronc around, and they saw his legs go outward and then dig viciously into the flanks of his bronc. The beast started off at a terrific pace, followed close by the three men with him.

"Save yuhr lead," Jim said.

There was no sense in doing anything else, although Bry snapped: "Me an' Dan c'n ride after them!"

"Yuh'll do nuthin' of the kind," said Jim. "There's four there an' mebbe others further along. I guess this isn't the time t'deal with Black." He spoke easily, and was breathing as if he had not made that big effort; neither of his brothers showed any serious inclination to disobey him. But as they neared the shack they heard what seemed like a moan.

Dan glanced swiftly at the fast disappearing outlaws. Black himself was out of sight around a bend in the trail, and the others would be in a few seconds. He said: "If they've hurt that woman—"

"Keep yuhr head," said Jim sharply.

"If they have," said Bry, tight-lipped, "I guess it's Digby's fault fer leavin' her alone."

"How would he know of Black?" flashed Jim.

There was no time for further arguing, for they had reached the shack, and they were out of the saddle like three men moving as one. Neverthe-

The attack on the Lazy K was over.

less Jim reached the door first—a door which fell clumsily from its hinges, and would be of little use to keep out wind or rain.

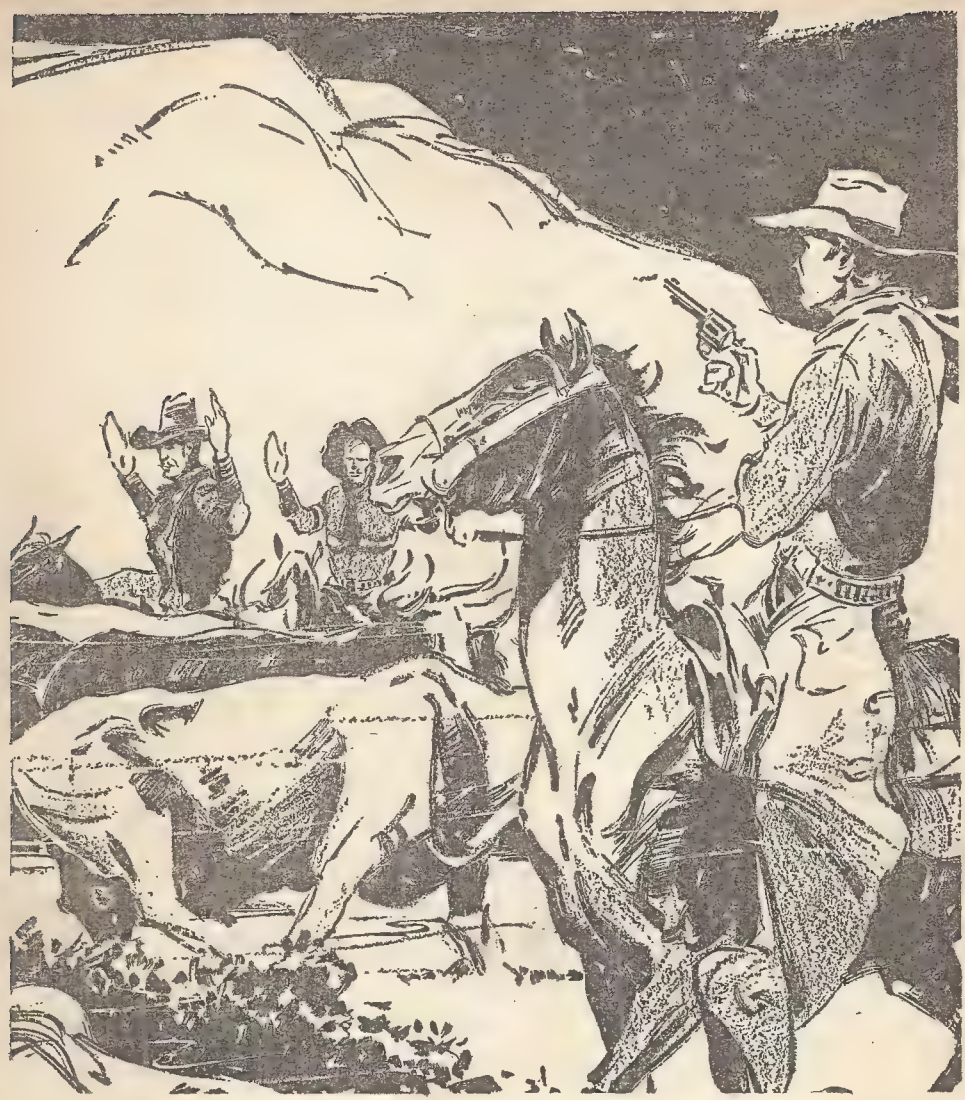
And then, on the threshold, he stopped.

The woman—although she was a little more than a girl—was standing unharmed with her back against an old stove, which was holding a fire that smoked badly, and filled the air with soot. Some of it was on her face, some on her bared right shoulder—where the cloth of her dress was torn. In her right hand there was a six-gun, and she pointed it toward him, without speaking.

Jim raised his right hand slowly. "Ma'am—"

"Put them both up! An' yuh others!"

There was fierceness in the words, and the three men obeyed, Dan and Bry somewhat sheepishly, Jim with a smile playing about his lips. They were able to see, then, not only the woman but the man who was lying on the floor in one corner, and who was clearly wounded. He was staring toward them through narrowed eyes,



and his breath was coming heavily.

Jim said easily: "Ma'am, yuh've my word on it that we come as friends. The others rode off for the reason we were coming."

"How am I to know you're not as bad?"

It was a pleasing voice, for all that it was taut with emotion. And although the girl's hair was disheveled and falling down her forehead and into her eyes, and although her lips were set except when she was speaking, it was obvious that there was beauty in her. And courage, for she was unwavering, and the smile in Jim's eyes increased.

"Yuh don't, ma'am, but I'm hopin' yuh'll find out. Yuh're Miss Digby, I guess; I've just given hire t'yuhr brother."

FOR A moment she stared, as if she could not believe her ears; then slowly her gun-arm was lowered, and she pushed her left hand through her hair, as if aware suddenly of the appearance that she offered them. "I hope it's true," she said. "I don't see how you could lie about that. Where—where's Johnny?"

"He'll be along," said Jim Kennedy

easily. "I guess we left him in Blue Clay, an' didn't tell him that we were aimin' to hit this trail. Yuh'll excuse me, ma'am, if I congratulate yuh?"

She said nothing.

Neither Bry nor Dan felt at ease, but they acted with alacrity when Jim said quietly: "See what yuh c'n do fer that *hombre*."

As they stepped to the wounded man, Jim approached the girl. Her eyes, very wide-set and blue, were uncertain. He hooked his thumbs into his belt, and said smilingly: "It's true, ma'am, we mean no harm. Name of Kennedy—all of us. How long had they been here?"

Automatically she continued to tidy her hair.

"Not—not long. They—" She stopped, and Jim said swiftly: "There's no need t'go into that, ma'am. I'm mighty glad yuh managed t'get a gun in time t'make them ree-lize that it wasn't all their own way, an' if yuh'll excuse me fer sayin' so, I reckon yuh showed a mighty fine courage. I guess five against one was enough to've made most men stop fightin'."

She shrugged. "I—I had no choice, I think—" She hesitated again and then went on with a rush: "I'll make coffee. Yuh'll excuse me."

She moved swiftly, through a closed door of the shack, which, Jim knew, had three rooms. He smiled to himself, with one eyebrow raised a little above the other, and then turned to his brothers. They had bandaged the wound in the man's thigh—the girl had fired for his legs—and he had been cursing with pain as they had worked. Now he was lying on the dirt floor, with his own hat folded beneath him as a pillow.

Jim said: "We c'n talk t'yuh later, Where's Black's hideout?"

"How should I know?" growled the wounded man.

Jim's lips tightened. "Yuh'll have t'find that out." he said, "An' yuh c'n take it from me that the way to escape a lynchin' is t'find yuhr mem'ry pretty fast. Fer what yuh've tried to do, lynchin's the right punishment, an' mebbe not painful enough." To Bry he said: "Tie his hands. I don't trust snakes."

Bry obliged, by which time ten minutes or more had passed. Jim did not expect the girl to come out of the room, to which she had retired, with coffee. Her talk of that, he reckoned, had been an excuse to get away for a while, so that she could tidy herself. He did not blame her for that. Jim was frowning to himself at the sight she had presented when he had first appeared on the threshold; her torn dress had revealed that Black and his hirelings had had every intention of assaulting her.

It was not to be expected that Black would behave differently, but the thought made Jim Kennedy curse the name of the renegade more than he had ever done in the past. He suspected that his brothers felt the same.

But there was more to the girl's appearance than the torn dress. Her eyes, when she had told him to put his hands up, had held fire, and a grimness of purpose which was not to be denied.

He shrugged—and then the door opened.

HE WAS no more startled than his brothers to see her with a tin tray in her hands, and coffee and tin cups on the tray. Bry and Dan rushed together to relieve her of it, collided, and then almost upset the coffee. The girl's eyes showed something Jim had hardly believed possible so soon after the affair with Black: there was a secret humor lurking in the depths of her blue eyes.

"We'ell," drawled Jim, "I guess thisyere's mighty handsome, ma'am!"

But he was not thinking only of the coffee.

She had put on a different dress, but nothing in the world could have made it new. It was patched in places, but it was clean, and well ironed. More, it fitted her tightly to the waist so that her rounded figure showed in all its attractiveness; and the long skirt, trailing on the dirt floor, was wide and sweeping. About her as she walked there was a grace more becoming to a salon than to an

old and little used shack in the far west of Texas.

She had coiled her hair about her head, hurriedly, and yet with a touch that made it look perfect. Dark hair, which was unusual with eyes so deep a blue.

She did not look once at the man she had wounded.

She poured for Jim, and then the others, reserving a little only for herself. The coffee was rich with milk, and there was sugar enough. They did not talk much as they drank, but as she finished she spoke with a rush. Jim was at once reminded of the quick way her brother had spoken, and of the possibility that she had wanted to say this for some time.

"Mr. Kennedy—yuh were serious when yuh said yuh had given my brother hire?"

"Dead serious, ma'am," said Jim. "An' hearin' from him where yuh were stayin', it occurred t'me that we should look in, seein' that we were passin' on the way to the YB outfit." He uttered that lie without blinking, and there was no likelihood of the girl suspecting the real reason for their visit. "It was lucky we did, ma'am, although t'me it looks as if yuh're able t'take care of yuhrself mighty well."

The half-smile in her eyes deepened. "That's as may be. I—I can't thank yuh enough."

"Yuh don't need to," said Jim offhandedly, "for anythin', ma'am. As it happens, it was on the trail that we-all ree-lized Black was in the country. He's been before," he added, and he saw her flinch. "The big, bearded man, ma'am."

"I—guessed."

"A no-good *hombre* if ever there was one," went on Jim, "but there's one thing t'be said fer him; he's got no likin' fer a fight, an' he doan stay around long. But seein' he is around, I guess yuh'll be wise t'ride in with us."

"Yes, but Johnny—"

"If he doan show up afore yuh're ready t'leave," said Jim, "I guess we c'n leave a message fer him. My brothers c'n ride on with the word we have fer the YB." He paused, and grinned to himself when he saw the incipent scowls on the faces of Bry and Dan, who would have preferred to be left with the girl. "An' that reminds me, ma'am, we aren't all properly introduced. Thisyere's Dan Kennedy—an' this is Bryan, the first syllable used fer short."

"Yuhr servant, ma'am." Dan swept off his Stetson.

"Yuhrs, ma'am," said Bry, who had not put his on after entering the shack.

"I—I am Stella Digby," said the girl, and the name suited her. "But I should not put yuh out this way, Mr. Kennedy."

"It's puttin' no one out," said Jim.

His brothers did not stay to argue. They rode ahead with the word for the YB and Jim helped the girl to collect what few oddments she had for packing. There was the injured outlaw for attention, but he would not give serious trouble, Jim knew.

He was appalled at the lack of clothes and necessaries in the shack, and yet marveled at the appearance which the girl contrived to produce. She had, she admitted awkwardly, encouraged a cow to the small corral at the back of the shack, and kept it there for milk—thus explaining the creamy coffee.

Jim chuckled. "Pete Dexter've the YB wouldn't have no objection t'that, ma'am, yuh needn't be afeerd. We'll mention it to the YB folks as we pass. I'm wonderin' if yuhr brother will be long," he added.

"We can go on," she said.

"Ye-es," mused Jim. "We could get better acquainted if all three rode together, I reckon. How fer East have yuh come from, ma'am?"

He asked the question as if unthinking, but he had not forgotten the way that Digby had slurred over the answer to it when it had been put to him. As he spoke he was bending over a bag filled with her belongings, and he did not look up enough to show her what he was doing. But he did see the quick flush on her cheeks, and he sensed the tension which had come into the atmosphere with his question.

4

THERE WAS mystery, of course; Jim had sensed it in Johnny Digby, and now he had all the confirmation that he wanted. He remembered when he had seen the youngster he had observed anxiety that might have been tinged with fear in his eyes—and now he saw the same thing in the girl's. But he wished he had not put the question, for all that, and was relieved when he heard the distant sound of hoofbeats.

He straightened up at once. "I reckon that's yuhr brother, ma'am. I'll take a look-see."

He went to the door, and when he reached it he heard her sigh, as if with relief. He ignored that, and shaded his eyes against the sun. It was Digby, riding fast toward the shack, with his hat on the back of his head and an expression of sheer delight on his features. He did not see Jim, and less than a hundred yards from the shack he shouted:

"Yip-yip-yippee! Stella what're yuh waitin' for ?"

The girl moved, and Jim stepped aside to let her pass. As she ran into the open, Johnny Digby's gasp was plain to the ear. "My, are yuh lookin' swell! Fer why the celebration, Stella?"

"Yuh can guess," she called.

Jim's smile had a touch of uncertainty in it, and yet he recognized the happiness in both of their voices. He kept out of sight, and he heard the murmur of low-pitched voices as the girl told Digby what had happened. Johnny had slipped from the saddle, and one hand gripped his sister's arm.

Jim saw the young face darken. "The damn snakes," he said in a voice that was so harsh that it might have come from a much older man. "I'll see the coyotes swinging if it's the last thing I do. Sis—yuh're sure yuh're all right?"

"Yes, yes, nothing happened!"

Jim reckoned it was time to show himself, and went forward smiling a welcome. Johnny Digby released his sister, and approached the other man. "Mr. Kennedy, I guess I c'n never say how much I'm grateful. Yuh've surely made a reason for the Digbys to want t'serve yuh."

"Aw, shucks," said Jim, and added: "There's no call fer formality, Digby. My father's the only 'Mister' on the Lazy-K. An' now if yuh've no objection, we'll hit the trail. We c'n feed further up," he said. "We want t'reach the Lazy-K soon after dark."

An hour's riding over rolling prairie which stretched on either side took them to the YB outfit. Bry and Dan were waiting outside, and Guess —the YB foreman—was with them. He was a middle-aged, gray-bearded man, short and stocky and bowlegged. His hard-bitten face rarely relaxed in a smile, and he controlled the YB almost as much as its hard-drinking owner. Pete Dexter had all the good will in the world when he was sober, but he drank too often and too much; probably he was on a drunken carousal in Austin.

Guess nodded curtly to Jim, and acknowledged Stella with a touch of his hat. "How're yuh, ma'am. I've had the word, Jim. I guess we-all will have t'try to get Black this time."

"I'm hopin'," said Jim. He had been riding with Stella on the renegade's bronc, and the wounded man across his own saddle. "Mebbe this fella can help. Will yuh look after him fer a while? An' keep askin' questions, any way yuh like."

Guess stared stonily at the prisoner. "He'll say what he knows," he said.

"That's dandy. So far he's been obstinate, but there's ways've stoppin' that."

"Yuh don't haff t'tell me," said Guess icily. He called two men. "Get this coyote into a bunkhouse, an' handle him the way yuh please."

DIGBY STARED at the prisoner with a scarcely veiled hatred that was appalling in its way. Stella's expression was different and it was clear that words were on the tip of her tongue. Jim said swiftly: "That's all right, then. I'll send word out to my camps t'be on the watch for Black, an' I'll ride over an' compare notes in two-three days."

"That suits me," said Guess.

He stood watching them as they rode off, and Jim was preoccupied, then amused at the way in which his brothers angled for Stella Digby's conversation. It was impossible to believe that she did not realize it, but she shared her favors with a scrupulous fairness. For a while Jim and Digby rode on ahead, and then Stella called: "Mr. Kennedy—I'd like a word with yuh."

"I'm waitin', ma'am." Jim slowed, and his brothers rode ahead with Digby. Jim kept his face straight, although still amused by their attentiveness, and by the sight of the girl in her long black velvet dress sitting astride the renegade's pony. She looked as if she had been used to riding that way all her life, and in spite of the heat she showed no signs of fatigue. She was wearing a big Stetson, also of black. "Why did yuh stop me speaking, back there?" she said abruptly.

Jim smiled. "So yuh ree-lized that, ma'am."

"Of course."

"We'ell," said Jim, "I guess yuh were goin' to remind Guess that the prisoner was wounded. I'm not sayin' that wasn't mighty gallant've yuh, but Guess has his own way, an' it's the way've Texas, with renegades an' cow-thieving hombres. What's more, he would have heard the story from my brothers."

Stella Digby said quietly: "I don't want a man to suffer more because of me."

"We-ell," said Jim easily, "it wouldn't be true t'say that he was goin' t'suffer because of yuh, ma'am. It's the principle've the thing as much as anythin' else. There's prospectors in the hills, an' their wives an' families. Black has a reputation," he added, for he knew that there was no sense mincing words.

She caught her breath. "Meaning?"

"He'll die," said Jim Kennedy, and he spoke in a curiously detached way. "He'll be lynched, ma'am, an' that will be as soon as his leg has mended. He knows that as well's yuh an' me; also, he has one chance've escapin', although t'me it looks a mighty slim one."

"What is it?"

"If he tells all he knows, they might release him."

"I—see." For some minutes they rode along in silence, and then she said with sharp feeling in her voice: "There's no reason in lynch-law—it's madness. But it rules here, and I can't argue about that. But he was *yuhr* prisoner."

Jim said: "No, ma'am. He was taken on YB land."

"By yuh."

"It doesn't signify who caught him. Black's operatin' on the YB; he always starts thataway, fer the reason it's nearest the border, an' he can get beeves over quicker. When the YB's honed up to stop him, he'll try the Lazy-K and M.M." He pronounced the latter "M-dot-M but she made no query about that. "There's another fact," he went on. "The renegade is one of the rustlers, an' rustlin' is a lynch-crime. Does that ease yuhr mind?"

She shrugged. "It's—primitive."

JIM CHUCKLED. "Ma'am, life in the West is mostly thataway. Hadn't yuh known of it before? An' wouldn't yuh call the five men who visited yuh this mornin' primitive?"

"They were outlaws. I—I haven't lived on the range, Mr. Kennedy; I've spent most of my time in Austin. Johnny's always been on the range, though."

"Is that so?" Jim said politely.

"Since he was a boy," Stella Digby said, "he's been range-mad. My family disliked it, but—" She hesitated, and then went on quietly: "My mother and father died a year ago. We thought we were rich, but we were not. Johnny's made us a living on this ranch

and that, but it's not been easy. We kept coming further west in the hope of getting permanent hire for him—an' for me." There was a touch of bitterness in her tone. "On his own Johnny would have been all right. I have always been a liability to him; women aren't wanted on the range."

Jim smiled at her, deliberately. "It depends on the range, ma'am. At the Lazy-K there's my mother, who's almost past workin', and my sister, who works a sight too hard. We're a fam'ly of some size, an' there's more than a hundred men. There's room an' t'spare fer yuh, an' yuh want to stay."

"It's—good of yuh," she said quietly.

"It's lucky fer the Kennedys," Jim said.

* * *

WHEN THEY first came within sight of it, the ranchhouse of the Lazy-K was scarcely visible, but as they made progress it was possible to see the main buildings and the bunkhouses and sheds around it. Jim was still riding with Stella, and he saw her lips open slightly, the white teeth glistening beyond them, and he saw her eyes were gleaming.

The corral, with fifty or sixty horses, was on their side of the outfit, as were big stacks of hay and other fodder. About all of the buildings, and some hundred yards from them, was a stockade of pointed stakes close together and looking formidable; there were wide gaps in the stockade on all three sides that were not protected by the rock.

"That's the Lazy-K," Jim said.

"It—" He wondered what word she would use, and then she said soberly: "It's incredible, Mr. Kennedy."

That made him laugh. "It's a fact, ma'am!"

"It's glorious," she said. "It looks as if it's part of the hills, as if it's always been there."

"For nigh on a hundred years there's been buildings there," said Jim, "an' Kennedy buildings for fifty of them. There's water handy an' it was built where it is to avoid danger from the Injuns."

"Do yuh get trouble from them now?"

"We-ell," drawled Jim, "there's outbreaks from time t'time, but fer the most part they're friendly, an' live in their reserves without wantin' more. At times when Black's around some've the braves get restless. I guess Black makes money sellin' them liquor, which they call firewater. Howso, it's never serious. Yuh reckon yuh c'n make a home there for a while, ma'am?"

He wished he had not said that then, for he saw the tears that glistened in her eyes, then saw her look toward her brother, as if with anxiety and uncertainty. And although there was no real reason for it, Jim Kennedy read in that glance that she wondered whether she would be able to stay, or whether for some reason Johnny Digby would make it impossible.

And then he stopped thinking of the Digby's, for two riders set out from the ranch toward them—riding so fast that it could only mean tidings either very good or fairly bad.

5

AS THE two riders drew nearer, Jim recognized them. Moreover, their identity suggested that the news they brought was bad: it was close to impossible to imagine Nevada Bill and Arizona Pete coming at such speed with good news. They would say that excitement was meant only for the young.

Bry and Dan had the same feeling; they kneed their broncs, and met the old-timers half a mile from the ranch. The girl had eyes mostly for that, since now she was near enough to see that the window frames and the doors of the main buildings were painted green, and that what wind there was stirred gently the chintz curtains at the windows. Acacia and wisteria were growing near and about the ranch house, and a bower of small

crimson ramblers spread its way like an arch of flaming beauty over the large porch. A veranda, with ramblers and other climbers finding their way up each stout wooden pillar, ran along the whole of the front of the ranch, which was built four-square, and stretched for all of eighty feet.

If she was perturbed by the hasty appearance of the old-timers she made no sign. Jim said quietly: "Digby, will yuh'n yuhr sister ride up to the ranch, an' wait there fer me?"

"Surely," said Digby.

The youngster—he was about an age with Bry and Dan—thought Jim, had been remarkably silent on the journey, and it seemed easy to believe that he was worrying himself about the attack on his sister. But he answered promptly and willingly enough, and he smiled for the first time since leaving the old shack. Jim nodded to Stella, whose eyes seemed to mock him with their latent humor, and she rode even with her brother. Despite his anxiety to hear what Bill and Pete had to say, Jim watched her riding off, that strange figure in the full dress astride a man's pony, yet looking as though she had been riding one all her life.

Bry and Dan also watched her.

Nevada Bill, neither short nor tall, grizzled and so brown-faced that he might have been made of teak—some said he was tougher—was clean-shaven, or what passed for it: he had a week's stubble on his lined face, and it showed more in his cheeeks, which were sinking in because of his lack of teeth. He looked small and drained dry of blood, but there was fire in his gray eyes, and he could ride and shoot and hunt with most men.

Arizona Pete was large—so large even at his age that he made Jim look like a medium-sized man. Where Bill's hair was little more than iron-gray, Pete's was snowy white, and there was plenty of it. He had not gone thin, but plump, although his face was leathery and brown. An incipient double chin and a more than incipient paunch made him slower of movement than Bil; but he was as fast on the draw, and more anxious than Bill to prove his continued dexterity.

IT WAS Nevada Bill who spoke. "Wa-all," he said laconically, "I guess I've come across most things while workin' fer the Lazy-K, an' thisyere's just one more I didn't expect."

Jim took his eyes from the moving riders. "Is that so, Bill? I reckon yuh'n Pete will have t'be keerful, in future. Ridin' at that rate won't do yuhr old bones no good."

"Why, yuh ornery young scallywag!" roared Pete, always quick to take offense, "who in hell are yuh callin' old? Let me tell yuh I c'n ride with any've yuh young fellas who reckon it's a hard day's ride t'get to Blue Clay an' back. If yuh-all did the ridin' I useter do, I reckon yuhr backsides would be so full've corns yuh wouldn't know what it was to sit down peaceful. Old—huh! I'll live yuh out, an' yuhr childer!"

Jim's eyes smiled.

"If so yuh don't mind," said Nevada Bill with deceptive quiet, "I'll say a word, Pete. The three've yuh Kennedys followin' a woman dolled up the way she ought t'know better. An' then—"

"Nevada," said Bry, "I ain't never quarreled with yuh yet."

"Nor me," said Dan.

"But it ain't too late," said Bry.

Jim broke in. "Ease the talk, fellas. Yuh've got word've some kind that's none too good, Bill, an' none too bad or yuh wouldn't waste yuhr time argufyin' about where we're lookin'. What's happened?"

Bill and Pete exchanged glanses.

"Black," said Pete in a deep voice.

"Is around again," said Bill sepulchrally.

Jim grinned, and his brothers laughed.

"If that's all," said Bry, "I'm ridin'. Race you to the veranda, Dan."

"It's done." They set off at a rollicking pace, Bry waiting so that he would not have an unfair start. Nevada and Arizona looked a little taken aback by the calmness with which their news was received, but Bill said slowly: "It's more'n that, Jim, but how did you yuh know?"

Jim grinned. "That woman dolled up the way she ought t'know better shot one've his men, an' kept Black an' three others off long enough fer me an' the boys t'drive 'em off."

"Jehoshaphat!" exclaimed Pete. "Bill, yuh ought to withdraw them unkind words yuh said."

"It don't explain that parlor dress," said Bill obstinately.

"No," said Jim casually. "The one she was wearin' when Black called on her get itself torn."

The old-timers stared at him, and then at each other. Nevada Bill made a peculiar whistling sound between his lips, and said: "I reckon that coyote will haff t'go out this time. A gel like that don't deserve such an experience. How so—I'm glad yuh frightened Black off a while. There's talk that he's been on the south camp, an'—waal," drawled Bill, "a man's been shot up."

Jim's brows contracted. "One of ours?"

"Nope. Just a fella. It looked like he was ridin' alone, but he had no bronc, an' his water bottle was plumb empty. He'd been crawlin' over the mesa fer a while, an' I guess he died more've thirst than shootin'. But he'd been drilled three times, in the shoulder."

Jim urged his gray along slowly. "An' no one recognized him?"

"Nope."

"How long'd he been dead?"

"Twenty-four hours, more-less."

"Huh," grunted Jim. "An' near the south camp, which I take it is what yuh're drivin' at?"

Bill nodded, and Pete took up the tale. Three Lazy-K riders had been on their way to change the men at the south camp, which was one of the most difficult on the range, and from which cattle strayed into foothills with traps and crevices to trap the beeves. Droppings had shown that cows had wandered onto the mesa, which was a feasible thing, for there were patches of grass in places, and at one place a grassy stretch ran for most of a mile. Three-four miles of mesa followed, before the trail dropped downward into a valley on the other side of Lazy-K land. The valley was useless for cattle, but significant for one thing: it carried the trail that led over—or through—the Davis Mounts, and then to Mexico. It was, in fact, the place where Black would work on rustling Lazy-K stock.

"They never found the beeves," Pete wound up, "but they found this-yere fella. They took all've his papers and give him a decent burial, an' the riders they was relievin' brought the news back."

Jim nodded, without answering.

By then they were close to the ranch house, and there was much talking and laughing at the doorway. Jim could see his mother, white-haired and frail, but full of spirit, talking to Stella Digby. Sue was there, too, nearly as tall as the twins, and dressed in a long and colorful print frock with leg o' mutton sleeves. Her golden hair was braided, and even at that distance she looked worth seeing.

But darkness would soon be on them.

THEY HAD ridden fast, and taken little in the way of rest, thus making up for the time that had been lost, and Jim reckoned the girl would be worn out. The ride alone must have taken much out of her, while the strain of her morning experience must still be lingering in her mind.

He saw her disappear inside, followed by his mother and Sue. Bry, Dan and Digby followed them. Jim's eyes smiled a little at the thought of the change in the twins toward Digby, but he was thinking of that with only half of his mind. With Nevada and Arizona, he walked his bronc, musing for some minutes and then saying quietly: "I guess Black's got him a strong force, this time."

"Why?" asked Pete.

"Fer the reason he's operatin' more places than one," said Bill irascibly. "Ain't yuh got no sense?"

"More'n yuh'd have if yuh lived t'be a hundred an' three," growled Pete.

"Why'n hell can't yuh old-timers stop arguin' among yuhrselves?" asked Jim amusedly. "Yuh've been doin' it t'my knowledge fer twenty-

two years, an' most likely twenty-two afore that." He paused, and neither answered. "We-ell, Black's got himself enough men to rustle YB cattle as well as Lazy-K, an' to get himself as near to Blue Clay as the old shack. I guess I can't understand why he should get as near the township as that."

"Mebbe he was waitin' fer someone," said Pete.

"More likely he'd heard've the gel bein' there," said Bill somberly. "A woman allus did make Black do things he wouldn't've thought of if he'd been in his right mind. Some fellas fall fer rye, an' some fer poker, an' others fer gold," went on the old foreman, "an' some for women. There's always one thing a man can't do without, an' with Black it's women. I guess he gets plenty in Mex'co, but when he's on the rampage he gets kind've starved, an' he c'n smell them out."

"That don't sound nice t'me," said Arizona promptly.

"Ease it," said Jim thoughtfully. "Mebbe yuh're right, Bill; Black always was a man for women, I'll 'low. But even then it was mighty close to Blue Clay fer him t'chance hisself."

"What's in yuhr mind?" asked Bill.

"That he might've been aimin' t'talk with someone," said Jim.

"There ain't no one in Blue Clay would talk with him," pronounced Pete with assurance.

"Yuh've said that before, but I'm not so sure yuh're right," Jim differed. "Howsomever, we'll see. Yuh've sent word to the other camps, an' strengthened the south camp?"

"Surely," said Bill.

"What's my pa say?"

Bill grinned. "Did yuh ever hear him say more than that it would work out all right in the end? I guess he's leavin' it t'yuh an' stickin' his head in some've them books yuh ornery galoots brought him back from Austin the last time yuh were there. I can't figger how a man c'n read all day," added Bill with a shake of his head. "Howso, he told me t'handle it until yuh arrived."

"That's dandy," said Jim. "Fer safety's sake I guess we'll have men watchin' them cayuses tonight, although I reckon he won't come as close to the Lazy-K as that yet."

"He never will come within twenty miles!" scoffed Pete.

"Mebbe," allowed Jim. "We won't take the chance, anyways."

HE SLIPPED from his bronc, and led the horse to the corral and water and hay. After taking off the saddle he gave the shining skin a quick rubdown, and then patted the gray's flanks before turning and walking slowly toward the ranch house. By the time he was through, his brothers and Digby were attending their horses, and Stella's. Jim nodded their way, and then went into the ranch house. His mother and father were there, the old man sitting at a small table by the window, and reading while the light lasted. His mother, in a rocking chair, was looking toward the door, and her eyes lighted up when she saw him.

"Hello, Jim."

He went over and shook a fist playfully in her face. "From the time yuh heard Black was around yuh started worryin'," he said. "I c'n see it in yuhr eyes. How much did Bry an' Dan tell yuh about Miss Digby?"

"Little enough," said his mother. "Who is she, Jim?"

He explained briefly. His father had glanced up with a smile on his entry, but then returned to his book. During the recital he stopped reading, and when Jim had finished there was complete silence in the big room. Miriam Kennedy broke it.

"The child shall want for nothin' here," she said firmly. "And it makes me worried the more, Jim. Black is powerful bad; with enough men he can be dangerous, an' to me it looks as if he's plenty this time."

"I'm agreein'," said Jim. "An yuh, Father?"

"Wa-all," said Graham Kennedy judiciously, "I suppose yuh're right,

my boy. I guess I can leave all've the worryin' to yuh nowadays, however." His weak eyes, behind steel-rimmed glasses, smiled. In appearance he was an older, gray-haired edition of Jim, except that Jim had his mother's straight, short nose. "There's some papers that they took from the pore fella that died, Jim. Yuh'll want t'see them."

Jim nodded, and took them from his father. He glanced through an old wallet, and the few scraps of paper there. Most of them were so rubbed together by being carried in pocket or belt that they were indecipherable, but there was a comparatively clean envelope addressed on one side. Jim turned it over—and then went rigid.

For the address ran:

John Digby, Lessing Hotel,
Austin, Texas.

Jim read it twice, and then put it aside. But he could not evade his mother's direct stare, although Graham had gone back to his book.

"There's something in that makin' yuh think, Jim."

Jim nodded. "That's so. I reckon that there'll be plenty t'think about in the next two-three weeks. Howso, we'll let things ride fer tonight." He smiled, and she knew that no matter how she tried she would not get further word from him.

6

THE SUN had long since disappeared; and darkness was about the mountain, brightened only by the glimmer of the distant stars, stars an inconceivable distance away, and only specks shimmering in a velvety blue-black heaven. There were no clouds, and the moon was not due for a week or more. About the mountainside there was a hush broken occasionally by the rustling of a rat or rabbit, although most things of the earth were asleep.

The silence was broken suddenly.

Slowly at first, and distant—the sounds of horses moving cautiously through the darkness. To anyone by the land-locked lake there would have seemed a stealthiness about the approach, although in truth the trail up which the men came was narrow and difficult, and in the darkness each man had to feel his way along, or trust his horse.

The sounds drew nearer.

There were perhaps eight or nine men, riding single file while the trail ran through the rocks, and then three abreast at the water's edge. The darkness fitted one of the first trio, who was riding silently astride a gray whose flanks were red where the rowels of his spurs had that day drawn blood.

Into the darkness the men rode, until there was a vague yellow glow ahead of them. It increased, and when they were a mile from the lake they could see the flames leaping from three fires burning in the center of a clearing. By the lake itself there had been no sign of it.

The riders were silhouettes against the fires.

The leader, black-bearded and black haired, was a bigger man than any of them, and as they neared the clearing he quickened his bronc's pace, reaching the roughly built shack in the center of the clearing first. A figure darted from the shelter of it, and ran to the man whose name was Black—either by adoption or by birth.

A suave but high-pitched voice said: "I am waiting, *senor,* Miguel is waiting."

"Yuh've got nothin' else t'do." Black's voice was deep but harsh, and he climbed down from the saddle like a man tired of the flesh. "Get him seen to, pronto."

"Si, senor! Buenas noches."

Black made no answer, and the man who had taken his horse stared for a moment after the retreating figure. Not until Black had disappeared into the shelter of the shack did Miguel turn, and lead the horse to a small mountain stream. By then the others

had arrived, and they cursed Miguel or laughed at him, yet the darkness seemed to have cast a spell on all their tongues, and they spoke in hushed tones. For perhaps an hour there was movement, and sound; and then silence fell again, and even Miguel slept, outside the shack, his thin body stretched on sacks stuffed tightly with straw.

Black did not sleep.

There was a partition across the shack, and in a small section which he used for himself alone Black sat on a small chair, dwarfing it, and with rye whiskey in a glass and a bottle on the table in front of him. He had pulled off his boots, on his own—a rare thing, for usually he sent for Miguel to perform that task. He had loosened his kerchief and unfastened the top buttons of his shirt, to show a mat of black hair on his chest as thick as that on his hands and fingers. His eyes, reflecting the light of one of the fires that shone through a small window, looked small and inflamed.

His hand was unsteady when he poured himself out more whiskey, and halfway through the glass he belched, and spattered the contents over the table. He grunted, hauled himself to his feet, and fell—dressed as he was—into the bunk.

* * *

THE SUN was streaming through the window when he did rouse himself. His eyes were gummed together by sleep, and he rubbed them with his knuckles as he shouted for Miguel. The boy came running, his swarthy face strained. "The *senor* called?"

"Get me some eats," grunted Black, "an' make it fast."

"*Pronto, senor.*" Miguel turned and skipped out of the door. Black swore and then followed him. He walked to the end of the shack, and dipped his hands into a barrel of water, sluicing his head and shoulders, getting the sleep from his eyes. He rough-dried on a towel waving in the breeze, and then—still without boots on—walked back to the shack. He was hardly there before Miguel arrived with bacon, bread, coffee and eggs, cooked in a way to make most men's mouths water. Black glowered at it, and then at the boy.

"Didn't I tell yuh t'cook my eggs softer?"

"*Si, senor!* Miguel has—"

"Softer, I said!" Black struck at him, sending him reeling. Miguel steadied, and waited, his hands raised slightly as if in appeal. "Get out of my sight!" Black spoke then with his mouth crammed full, and the Mexican disappeared.

Most of the others had eaten.

There were twelve or fifteen men sitting about the clearing close to the embers fires which had been allowed to die now that clear mountain air was warmed by the sun, and the breeze had lost the coolness of the night before. Most of them were of a type with Black, the dregs of Texas. There were three half-breeds, and one Mexican. And there was one who kept apart from the others, although he was dressed in the same travel-worn clothes, similar boots, and with a kerchief about his neck. People who did not know him would have thought him a half-breed for only a very few Indians ever wore white men's clothes, in this country.

The coppery face, the hooked nose with the skin stretched tightly across it, and the narrowed, slanting eyes were those of an Indian; and a man who knew that country well would have seen the touch of the Kiawa about him.

Black had had time to finish his meal when there was a sound on the trail which the men had used the previous night, and through the ring of trees two riders broke. They went straight across the clearing, and the tension which their first arrival had brought disappeared. The men watched them idly. The Kiawa appeared to look elsewhere, but his eyes saw all there was to see.

One man was oldish, bearded, and corpulent. The other was tall and thin, a rakish individual with glittering eyes and flashing teeth that smiled as if he were hungry. His face was thin, as thin as the hatchet coun-

tenance of the redskin.

The riders had two things in common; both were well dressed, and both rode horses of a better breeding than any cow pony.

The breed—if he was a breed—slipped from his saddle and went into the shack without knocking. Black's voice was heard, and a minute later Black and the breed came out. The corpulant man was still in the saddle.

Black regarded him sourly. "Why'n't yuh tell me yuh were comin'?" he grunted.

"Is that necessary?" demanded the fat man.

"Gentlemen," said the other suavely, "it was unfortunate that there was no time for a warning; the matter was urgent. But we can discuss it now, yes?" His eyes were narrowed toward Black and the latter must have been aware of their scrutiny. He shrugged his big shoulders and nodded. As he lounged back against the door he took a yellow bag from his pocket, and began to roll the makings, one-handed. The brown paper of the cigarette drooped at one end as he struck a lucifer.

"All right, he growled. "What is it?"

"I want to know what you have done." The fat man's voice was sharp.

"Mebbe yuh reckon I've had time t'do anythin'?" flashed Black.

"You have—plenty."

Black licked his lips; "Now listen, yuh. I doan know who yuh are, an' I reckon I care a mighty lot less'n if yuh was the devil hisself. I'm workin' fer myself as well's yuh, an' if Diego wants me t'do yuhr work an' is willin' t'pay, that goes with me pervided yuh don't interfere. I've been workin' this country long 'nough t'know what c'n be done, an' what can't."

IT LOOKED for a moment as if there would be trouble. The fat man's face went red, and his plump hands tightened. Diego spoke swiftly, scowling at Black, smiling at the other—a remarkable thing, as it seemed that he did both at the same time.

"Surely, Black, we knew yuh were the one man fer the work. But there is need for haste."

"Wa-all, I don't hurry when there's no chance've winnin' that-away," said Black. "Mebbe yuh know what yuh want. I know what I c'n do, an' I'm doin' it. I've got most've fifty beeves through, an' I've lost only one man. That's what's happenin'."

"*Carramba!* Why did you not say so?" Diego's white teeth flashed. "It is superb, *senor*—it is work which is faster than ever we thought it could be. From who are the beeves, Black?"

"Mostly YB. Some Lazy-K."

The fat man grunted: "Where are the beeves?"

"Down the hill," said Black sourly. "In the usual place, Diego; yuh c'n see them on yuhr way down."

"That is excellent. *Senor,* I told you there was no need for fear. It will be as I said, and—"

"Listen," said the fat man sharply. "Getting the cattle is part of what I want; what's happened to the man Digby?"

Black licked his lips again. It was clear that he had been expecting the mention of that name, and it was the thing which was making him sour. He stared at the others for some seconds in silence, and then said carefully: "I'll get Digby, don't yuh fear."

"Why haven't you got him?" flashed the fat man.

"Because—"

A new voice came, from a man who had approached them unseen and unheard. A tall, thin-faced man with a harelip, and who spoke in a voice it was sometimes hard to understand. "We was waitin' fer Digby when the Kennedys came," he said, and the oath that followed was unprintable. "I guess with the Kennedys at the Lazy-K."

There was a sudden silence about the shack.

Black's little eyes, nearly as black as his name, shifted furtively, but kept coming back to look at the fat man. Diego held his breath. The speaker was chewing tobacco, and spat out a stream of dirty yellow fluid close to the door of the shack. And then the silence ended as the fat

man said in a voice which shook with anger: "You damned fool, I knew you'd lose him! If Digby's with the Kennedys he'll be twice as hard to kill. But you'll get him, or you won't get paid a dime for what else you do. Understand that! Get Digby—get him soon."

7

WHETHER JIM Kennedy would have acted differently had he been able to know of the conversation in the rustlers' hideout is neither here nor there. The same morning which had seen Black sleeping off the whiskey until past ten o'clock saw the Kennedys, except old Graham, up soon after the sun showed itself in the east, and with them the whole outfit awakened to life. The three old-timers preferred to eat in the big eating room set aside for the punchers, and consequently only the Kennedys and Stella Digby were in the ranch house. Johnny Digby, of course, was with the men.

Stella was early in the kitchen, assisting Sue and a colosal old squaw prepare the bacon and eggs. The squaw said little but smiled a lot as if proud of her perfect and glistening teeth, and grunted and wheezed and abused the fire, which had been recalcitrant after the first lighting. On the previous night the two girls and Miriam Kennedy had talked into the later hours, mostly about the situation which had arisen with the return of the rustlers. During their talk Stella had explained fully for the first time what had happened at the old shack.

The three brothers rose to their feet when Stella came into the dining room—not only because of Stella, but because it was usual in the Kennedy household. "Sit down, the three of yuh," said Sue, and laughed. "They're like jack-in-the-boxes, Stella—only Bry starts dreaming at times, and kind of forgets."

"Now that's unfair," protested Bry promptly. "I doan forget any more often than yuh forget t'bring the food in."

"What I'm wond'ring," said Jim mildly, "is how Miss Stella is this morning?"

Stella smiled as she slipped into her place. She gave no impression that she was strange or feeling awkward: she fitted into the life of the Lazy-K as if she had been born to it. It was impossible to feel ill at ease with her.

"I slept fine; truth to tell, it was the first night in weeks I've slept with both eyes closed. That shack was so full of the creeps I wonder I slept at all. And," she added frankly, "breakfast wasn't much like this."

Miriam Kennedy, straight-backed as a young girl, said: "Then set to and eat, lass."

Conversation ebbed and flowed. Between Sue and Bry there passed considerable altercation—they affected to quarrel far more than any of the others. Dan's eyes were more for Stella. Jim talked as much to his mother as to anyone, but was the first to finish. Excusing himself, he was also the first outside, where Johnny Digby and Nevada were standing and talking.

Johnny smiled a greeting.

"Yuhr sister's all right," Jim said. "She'll be out t'see yuh in a few minutes. Meanwhile we'll be ridin' in haff an hour."

"To where?" asked Nevada.

"The south camp; I'll take a look-see at the position there, an' also I'll show Digby that part've the range he'll be most interested in. Did yuh cross a stretch of mesa hitting the Blue Clay trail?" he asked Johnny.

Digby hesitated, and then nodded. "Surely—most of five miles wide, I reckon. On this side've it there was a fork-trail. I guessed at the left fork, and it took me to Blue Clay."

"The other would have brought yuh here," said Jim. "That's the limit of the Lazy-K, an' for the most part it's around there that the rustlers will operate. I'm assumin' yuh're an-

xious t'have a go at the man Black as soon's yuh can?"

"Yuh're right."

Jim and Nevada went into the corral, but there was little to say, except for Jim to give orders in the way of requests since he proposed riding with Dan and Bry, and they would be away for all of three days. His advice about covering the Lazy-K against any kind of attack was hardly necessary: Nevada had protected it against more Indians than Jim had ever seen.

Within the time limit, the Kennedys and Digby rode off.

The three woman waved and watched them out of sight, as they disappeared around the big rock. And Stella said quietly: "They'll be all right, Mrs Kennedy?"

"They always come back; yuh doan have to worry about them, Stella. There's plenty for yuh and Sue to worry about here."

THE FOUR riders said little on the first stage of the ride to the south camp. It was necessary for them to cross over a low line of hills, of which the fantastic black rock made the biggest peak. The hills were mostly grass-covered, although rock was too close to the surface for it to be good feed. A few beeves wandered on the sloping sides, not worrying about the shade, for the morning was young enough for the heat to be bearable. On one hill three miles from the ranch house, there was a copse of trees which looked small from a distance, but, in fact, stretched for a hundred yards. It was off the trail, but Jim turned his gray toward it and the others followed.

"Yuh're good at goin' off-trail," Bry said mischievously.

"Yuh're better at not thinkin' of anythin' useful," retorted Jim. He did not speak again, but slowed down as he reached the trees. The others spread out, Digby riding with Dan. He guessed what they were doing and with Dan searched the grass beneath and around the trees for signs that anyone had been there recently. It was not until they had rejoined Bry and Jim that they saw anything. Jim was off his saddle, and on his knees, loking at a patch of ground softer than most of it because of a small stream that appeared to run underground for a while.

"Yuh found something?" Dan asked sharply.

"Looks like."

Clear enough for them to see were the marks of men's boots. A townsman would have noticed nothing, unless it had been a slight impression on the grass that might have been made by anything, but the Texans had been trained to observe trail signs all their lives. After some seconds, Jim straightened. Dan looked at the grass, and then followed suit. "Two-three men."

"Three." Jim was definite. "Three, of different sizes, and here within a few hours, or the grass would have risen. I reckon they saw us coming, and ducked."

"Are yuh lookin' fer them?" Digby asked at once. Jim shook his head. "Searchin' these yere trees, an' other patches, would be just wastin' time, an' we ain't got it to waste. We'll ride."

They were silent for the next two hours, and they saw the up-trail again, for the ridges of the hills ran across that part of Texas in straight lines, with shallow valleys of rich rangeland in between them. This time the hills were steeper, and there was more rock, wild giant cacti rose on either side, and here and there were patches of sage, a pale purple in the bright light of the sun. There was sand as well as rock, for the mesa was not on high land.

After a while, they reached the fork in the trail. "This is where yuh came," Jim said, making it a statement and not a question.

"That's so."

"And others have been," said Dan, looking at the trail closely. "There's marks enough t'tell that, Jim. I reckon there's been men here within the past twelve hours."

"Likely yuh're right; eight-nine I guess. An' somewhere around here that pore fella was found dyin'."

"What fella?" asked Digby sharply.

Jim appeared not to notice the sharpness of the tone. "Some lone rider was hittin' the Blue Clay trail, an' was shot. I guess he saw more've Black's men than was good for him. They left him for dead, but he crawled away over the meas, near to the south camp, where he was found. No one knows who he was nor what he was doin'."

JIM BELIEVED that he saw a sign of relief on Digby's face, but he could not be sure. That worried him, coupled with the envelope which had been found on the dead man, although he did not say anything about it. The envelope was in his belt, and he thought about it a lot.

They rode on for most of another hour before they sighted the south camp.

It was nothing to speak of. There was a rough shed, more of a lean-to than a shed, for one side was bared to the wind and rain. Two men were lounging near it, and there was a bright fire burning, and billycans over it. The two loungers waved as the Kennedys and Digby rode up.

"Howdy, Clem. Howdy, Bart." Jim nodded as he spoke. "This yere's Johnny Digby. He's stayin' at the camp fer a while when we've given him a look-see."

'Howdy." Words and expressions were affable enough. Digby saw two men the like of which would be found on any outfit. Short, bowlegged, mustached and unshaven, with clear eyes used to looking into vast distances, and bodies worn thin by constant riding, men who possessed a wiry strength and an endurance unsurpassed in any country in the world. Clem was slightly the taller of the two, and his mustache was sandy, mixed with gray. Bart was dark-haired and was also distinguished by a broken nose.

There were twelve men making the camp their temporary headquarters. The others were riding the range, making sure that the cattle did not stray, and that Black's men were being watched should they appear. Not until after the simple meal did Jim say: "Yuh two've been warned about Black?"

"Sure,' said Clem, hooking a piece of meat from his long teeth with his bowie knife. "I guess the others have, too. We goin' ter get that coyote this time?"

"We're goin' to try mighty hard; keep your eyes wide all've the time, an' send word of anything unusual."

Clem and Bart nodded.

The rest of the day they rode over rangeland which to a strange eye must have seemed mostly the same. Rolling grassland, with occasional clusters of trees—oak and juniper for the most part—occasional patches of rocky land, shallow valleys, and innumerable streams winding sluggishly and with no apparent purpose across the range. The water was clear for the most part, with a bluish tinge, and the bottom was sandy. Few trails met them; the vast expanse of grassland was rarely trodden by horses except during a roundup or on the regular patrolling of the cattle country. Some idea of the size and extent of the Lazy-K was forced into Digby's mind, although he said little.

They camped that night by a narrow stream, and lit a big fire to keep off prairie dogs and wolves. There was no incident, and the next day passed much as the previous one, with the rangeland intersected frequently by narrow lines of hills, and the streams

They reached the south camp again at nightfall Clem and Bart were still in position, and there had been no developments. After food, and while it was still light, Jim and Johnny walked toward the stream. Behind them Clem was strumming on a guitar which he had used since he could remember, and Dan and Bry were singing. Bart was making a queer whistling sound, lying on his back with his eyes closed.

Jim was frank. "I'm goin' to ask yuh questions, Digby, t'see if yuh've got the lay've the land. Yuh won't be ridin' alone fer a while, but yuh

might be caught out. Yuh'll answer?"

"Sure."

Johnny made one or two misses, but for the most part showed that he had the real puncher's instinct for land, and landmarks. Jim knew that if he was alone on the range he would not be lost for long, and he was satisfied that Digby had at least considerable experience in range work. They strolled back, and joined the concert party. Bry had a good tenor voice and sang solo two-three times. He ignored the taunting remarks from Dan.

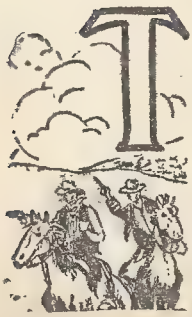
Darkness began to fall about them, and they heaped the fire up. It was impossible to realize fully that death stalked the range, that while the rustlers were abroad there would be shooting and murder, cow-thieving and horse-stealing without end. Difficult to believe that the peacefulness of the camp might be shattered by the rattle of six-guns or the more distant cracking of Winchesters.

But that happened!

Winchesters cracked, clear enough for them to be recognized, but from some distance off. A lucky bullet went plump into the fire, scattering red-hot embers and flaming sticks in all directions. Another pierced Clem's Stetson as he moved out of sight of the light of the fire.

All six of them scrambled away, and the shooting stopped, but was started again in a minute later, and this time from six-guns that were little more than a hundred feet away!

8



THE SCRAMBLE from the fire was the first and obvious thing to do. While they had been shown up against it they were clear targets, but as they separated the chances of their being hit lessened—hence the six-gun shooting. They took cover in the shed, and for a moment the shooting ceased.

The only light in the sky was a pale glow toward the west.

Jim said softly: "They're not far off, but they had t'come round the back've the shed t'take cover behind the rocks along there. I guess they won't risk showin' theirselves much. Yuh-all will stay here, 'cept Clem. Come on, Clem."

The two left the cover of the shed, on their stomachs, and with their guns in their hands. It was almost impossible to see them even at a range of ten feet, and there was no chance at all of them being seen by the attackers.

By the shed, Digby whispered: "What'll we do?"

"Give them time t'get away from chance bullets, an' then start shootin'," Bart returned. "An' I reckon they've had time now. Two've us by each end've the shack. An' don't waste too much lead; there ain't all that t'spare."

Digby found himself with Bry Kennedy. Bry kept low, and Johnny stood up, peering cautiously around the edge and toward the darkness that lay beyond. He remembered the low row of rocks not far away, and which helped to shelter the shed from the worst of the prevailing winds in winter. As he poked his head around a bullet came from the rocks—an accidental one, but uncomfortably close.

He fired toward the stab of flame which located it. More shooting started, and they returned the fire cautiously, knowing as they did so that it would not be long before an attack would begin in the other direction. The main attack was not yet launched. There was not one of them who did not feel more excited than afraid, and the other three had taken Johnny's reaction for granted.

He was breathing hard and fast but had they been able to see his eyes they would have seen the gleam in them.

The attackers were shooting more furiously now, clearly to cover an approach from a different direction. Bullets struck against the wooden

sides of the shed, but did no damage. And then suddenly there was a burst from the opposite direction. The shooting was wide, for one of the horses tethered twenty yards away squealed in pain, proving it had been hit.

"The damned coyotes," growled Bart. "They ain't got the guts t'fight in the daylight; they haff t'try to kill us off by night. I reckon there's a good crowd've them."

"It looks that way," said Dan.

"What's Jim waitin' fer? asked Bry.

"Yuh doan haff t'worry about Jim," said Bart.

That was not the first time that Johnny Digby had heard something showing the complete reliance of the Lazy-K riders in their leader, and silence fell for a moment, to be broken again by a volley of shots which came umpleasantly close. They returned the fire, and heard an oath from among the speckles of flame ahead of them. A moment later Bart swore. "Yuh hurt?" flashed Dan.

"Nuthin' to speak of. They couldn't shoot straight if they had all the light an' all the time in the world," growled Bart. I'll show them—"

He fired as flame stabbed ahead of him, and again there was an oath from a man who had been wounded. And then the attacking fire increased. It came from at least eight directions, from men spaced out some five yards from each other. The Lazy-K men were closer together in the shed, which at first had offered protection, but now, because the direction of the attack had changed, offered greater risk. The open side revealed them, and they began to crawl away from each other. As if their silence told the attackers what they were doing, the shooting started afresh.

Johnny, next to Dan, heard the other gasp.

He stopped, and called: "Yuh all right, Dan?"

"I guess." The tense voice in which the words were uttered proved that it was not the case, and Johnny crawled back to the other, who showed as a vague lump against the ground. Dan Kennedy was stretched out, on his side. Johnny's hand found his.

"Where'd they get yuh?"

"My—my shoulder, I guess."

But it was more than his shoulder, Johnny found. It was lower down, and perilously close to the lung. He said nothing as he worked in the darkness, taking a kerchief from his belt—a clean one for such an emergency—and padding the wound, pressing hard to stop the bleeding. Dan did not wince, although he must have been in considerable pain.

And then shooting started from behind the attackers.

THERE WAS no doubt about it, and Johnny stopped his work for a moment to watch. The attackers had been closing in, believing that their men were still in the shed. And the shooting was at them, taking them in the rear and by surprise. Oaths filled the night air, allied to the shooting, which had slackened considerably while the attackers spread out further, and probably went for cover.

Johnny finished his bandaging. "Thanks," Dan grunted. "I guess—I'll be—all right."

"Sure yuh will," said Johnny.

But he did not obey the other's unspoken suggestion—that he should leave him and join in the defense more actively. With guns packed in both hands, he waited, watching the stabs of flame that were all about them, but not shooting, since he wanted to avoid drawing fire. In the darkness, split so strangely by the flaming guns, it was impossible to judge what was happening, or to do much accurate shooting. But the direction was clearly changing; the attackers were withdrawing to the shelter of the rocks which had given them the chance of making their first assault.

The shooting slackened still further.

A sudden burst—and then a flurry of horses' hoofs, and a galloping sound that could not be mistaken. There was no sound of pursuit, however, and the blackness descended about them like velvet, thick and smooth and oppressive.

And then men drew near.

"Where are yuh-all?" This from Clem.

"Here's Dan an' Digby," Digby called.

"Yuh all right?"

"Dan's caught one, I guess."

He heard a sharp intake of breath, and guessed it to be from Jim or Bry. Footsteps, still quiet because of the possibility that all the attackers had not gone, approached. Jim Kennedy's voice came close to Digby's ear. The big man had come up silently and yet with unerring direction, as if he could see in the dark.

"How're yuh, Dan?"

There was no answer. Johnny Digby felt a sudden rush of panic, and Jim's voice strengthened. "Dan—how're yuh?"

There was still no answer, and Digby stretched out his right hand, touching Dan's lips. He could feel the slight movement, and said so as Jim drew nearer. Jim's hands explored the wound.

"It's low; he'll need a doctor. Clem—yuh'll ride for Blue Clay at once. Get Doc Sidey if he's there; if not, bring Clement."

"To where?" Clem's voice was like a ghost's.

"To the Lazy-K. We'll get him there afore sun-up."

"I'm ridin'," said Clem.

Bart and Bry came up, and in the darkness and yet with a surprising certainty and gentleness they moved the unconscious man so that he was more comfortable. Slowly, laboriously, Bry and Bart then fetched the horses, one at a time, to make sure that no sign was given to anyone who might be watching. A ripping sound followed, and Digby judged correctly that Jim was cutting up a blanket to muffle the hoofs of their broncs. It was incredible that so much was done with utter silence.

THE FIRE was all but out, and they were able to work in the shelter of the north side of the shack. In fifteen-twenty minutes they were ready, with Dan tied to the saddle of his bronc and supported by Jim, on his right side. Jim said: "Bry, yuh an' Bart will stay around, an' as soon's it's light yuh'll ride an' tell the other fellas. The beeves will be moved as much as possible over the next row've hills. Yuh got all've that?"

"Sure," said Bry and Bart as in one breath.

"Digby, yuh'll ride with me."

"But, I want to get at Black as much as anyone, an'—"

"I'd rather yuh rode with me," said Jim, and there was such finality in his voice that Digby made no further argument. The two of them started out in a ghostly silence, only just able to hear the muffled hoofs of their own broncs. They rode on either side of the unconscious Dan, and Digby knew one thing—it was essentail to get Dan as close to the ranch as possible before the sun came up. With luck, they would make the journey, although on his own he could never have found his way.

"How far will we get afore sun-up?" he asked at last.

"I'm hopin' right there," said Jim. "Yuh all right?"

"Sure."

"Nuthin' ranklin' in yuhr mind about comin' with me?" Johnny smiled in the darkness. "Nossir! Yuh're the boss. I guess I would like t'have a shot at Black just as soon as I can, but fer the time I'm workin' fer yuh I'm doin' what yuh say. Mebbe I shouldn't have argued, but—"

"That's all right with me," said Jim, and he sounded relieved. "I reckon I don't want yuhr sister worried too much, Digby."

"Thanks. Yuh're mighty thoughtful." Johnny was silent for a while, but went on: "Yuhr ma will be mighty worried about Bry."

Jim shrugged. "It's so. But she wouldn't have it diff'rent. When yuh've ridden the range a bit more yuh'll be in a position to take more chances than yuh can now. I reckon that it'll be daylight in most of an hour."

"An' will we make it?"

"Short of an odd two-three miles. I reckon."

It was uncanny, thought Digby, how Jim Kennedy could judge the time and the mileage they had traveled despite the darkness, but it was not long before he knew that the other was right. The golden dawn, with a deep orange in the far-distant skies, showed the clump of trees on the hill three miles from the Lazy-K at the time when daylight, raw and pale, was enough for them to see well.

"Yuh were right," he said.

"Sure. How fast c'n yuh draw?"

Digby stared—and then demonstrated. His right-hand gun came out at a good speed, and then went back; Jim nodded and smiled, but his expression was somber.

"That's fine. Be ready."

"Are yuh expectin' trouble?"

"From that clump, mebbe. I'm wishin' now that I'd sent word back that it had been used."

There was hardly a pause between his last word and the first shot from the clump of trees. Neither of them saw the flash of flame, and the bullet was past them in the ground not two yards away before the roar of the shot reached their ears. The shooting came again, and Jim moved with an uncanny speed. "Keep firin'!"

As he shouted, he eased himself up in his saddle, and then changed horses! It happened with a swift speed which made it look easy, although Digby knew better than that. Jim was behind his brother, then, and he sent the gray racing for the ranch house with a slap on its rump. He eased Dan's body to one side, half covering it with his own, and then set out as fast as the other bronc would go, firing toward the clump as he went. Digby roared: "I'll cover yuh!"

And as he spoke the youngster started to ride toward the clump of trees, aiming to draw fire, and to make Kennedy's ride easier. But Jim, seeing what the other was doing, knew that it was the nearest thing to suicide that any man could attempt without actually killing himself. The shooting came faster and bullets flew about Johnny Digby's head.

9

THE BATTLE would last only for minutes; that was certain, for as the shooting started men were already in sight in the corral, and horses were being reared around and ready for riding. Winchesters started to crack from the ranch house, toward the clump of trees, while Jim and his helpless burden raced from the ranch, and Digby went closer to the clump, swaying from side to side and firing as he went.

His stetson whirled from his head, but through the trees he could see the figures of the men, and he brought one off the saddle. He saw another man aiming, with careful precision, but his own bullet went close enough to the man to make him miss his aim. Digby swerved to his right.

It was useless for him to ride straight into the men behind the trees, but once in the clump he knew that he would be more difficult a target. He was within ten yards of a small patch when a bullet thudded into the flank of his bronc. The beast reared squealing with the sudden pain. Johnny, on one side to avoid the lead swinging his way, was helpless. He was sent flying from the saddle, and he kept hold on his gun only by a miracle. Even then it availed him little, for he crashed down, and the wind was jolted from his body. He sprawled there, in full sight of the men in the trees a helpless victim.

He started to roll over; it was as well he did, for bullets bit the earth where he had been lying. It was impossible for him to return any fire, and he kept rolling, gasping for breath as he did so, trying desperately to find the cover of the trees. The roaring of the six-guns and the squealing of his wounded bronc was in his ears all the time—and the oaths

of the men shooting at him.

He reached the trees. For the first time he dared lie still, and he was gasping for breath so much that his lungs seemed to be on fire, and there was a loud drumming in his ears which kept out all the other sounds. He gulped, and clawed at the grass, and as he did so three-four riders from the Lazy-K came thundering up. They were firing into the clump, and the men in the trees were making for their broncs—those who were already in the saddle were already on their way to the rangeland on the other side.

Johnny recognized none of the Lazy-K men. He could hardly see the trees themselves, for the red-heat in his lungs seemed to get worse, and his eyes were filmed with tears he could not keep back.

Had he been able he would have seen Nevada and Arizona riding in a way that proved they had all the old spirit and most of their old fire. Younger men, eight or nine in all, were ringing the clump of trees, and firing whenever they saw something move inside. Half the Lazy-K men went one way, half the other. The idea was to make sure no one slipped out of the trees after they had passed.

Shooting was spasmodic, then the two parties met, and as they did so they could see all of eight men, spread out riding fast away from the clump of trees. Six-guns began to smoke again, faster now, and Lazy-K men were on the trail with a grim earnestness which only they could show.

Two of the rustlers crashed from their saddles.

The Lazy-K swept past them, sometimes one man after a single outlaw, sometimes two in pursuit. Each Lazy-K rider had a definite objective, and for some while the pace quickened, but the distance between pursuer and pursued stayed about the same. And then the Lazy-K began to gain the upper hand.

Another rustler crashed. They were in a shallow valley, and for some seconds it would enable the punchers to gain still further, for the rustlers had to make the climb on the other side. Bullets poured out one after the other, but the speed made the shooting difficult and stopped all chance of real accuracy.

A fourth rustler went from his saddle.

There was no attempt when they reached the top of the rise to turn and take advantage of the cover it gave them, but just ahead there was the first stretch of mesa and rocky land, and once the rustlers reached it they would have a better chance of escape. The shooting quickened, but lead was being wasted, and suddenly Nevada raised a hand.

The Lazy-K men slowed down as the last of the rustlers disappeared among the rocks, and Nevada spoke heavily, breathing hard, "We doan haff t'go too far."

"That's so," said Arizona. "I guess we've put paid to four've the yeller-bellied coyotes."

"It's so. "We'll colleck them" said Nevada.

The ride back was slower, for they had to stop by each of the rustlers, to make sure of their condition. Two were dead. Two others were wounded so badly that they would need considerable nursing and attention to get them fit for hanging—in Nevada's grim words. In the clump of trees they found another dead man, one of Johnny Digby's victims.

"I guess," Nevada said as they neared the outfit, "that kid has the guts've most men, Arizona Pete.

"Waal, I ain't argufyin', are I?" demanded Pete.

"I was just tellin' yuh."

"Yuh doan haff t'tell me nuthin'."

"Why—can't yuh remember it?" said Bill.

Pete went into a huffy silence, while the younger men grinned among themselves at the never-ending bickering between the old-timers. They were half a mile from the ranch house then, and they saw that Johnny Digby was halfway between them and the ranch on the back of a horse which had been brought out from the corral for him.

The prisoners were taken to the bunkhouse, and Arizona started to cleanse their wounds.

Johnny was taken to the main ranch house. He saw Stella, and her eyes were bright when she saw him, partly with pride—although he did not know that then—and partly with relief at the thought of him unhurt. Dan was already in one of the small rooms, and his mother was cleaning the bullet hole in his chest.

Jim and Graham Kennedy were with Sue and Stella in the big room when Johnny entered; the calmness there was an amazing thing. It was hardly possible to believe that there had been bitter fighting only a mile or so away, that one son of the house had been brought in badly wounded, and that the evidence went to show that the Lazy-K was being watched as closely as if redskins were on the war path.

Jim was smiling, and there was steaming coffee on the table in front of him. Once Johnny arrived, Sue and Stella went to prepare breakfast.

Jim poured out coffee for Digby, who sat down gratefully. Graham Kennedy regarded the youngster through his steel-rimmed glasses, and said quietly: "Jim told yuhr part, an' I'm obliged t'yuh, sir."

"There's no call for that," said Johnny promptly. "I guess all I can do 'gainst Black is for myself as well's the Lazy-K sir."

"It's a question," said the old man, "of the degree to which one is prepared to go for oneself. I am proud to have yuh workin' on the Lazy-K."

Johnny colored. Jim smiled. "An' that goes fer the rest've us, I guess. The way yuh went at them coyotes was a thing t'remember, an' I guess if they hadn't been compelled to aim yuhr way they might've got another wound on Dan. Howso—here's cawfee."

Johnny drank, and then ate breakfast brought in again by the two girls. It was the first meal he had eaten inside the ranch house, and it occured to him that the food was little different from that served to the men—and that difference was only in the cooking, which was done by the punchers themselves. For a while there was quiet in the big room, with only Jim, Graham Kennedy and Johnny there. Soon afterward a door opened and Miriam appeared. Her white hair was as prim and neat as if she had not been working hard for the last half-hour with the sqaw assistant.

Her husband looked up at her sharply. "He'll do," she said, and her lips relaxed a little, while it was possible then to see the strain under which she had been living since Dan had been brought in. "I hope Doc Sidey can come."

Jimmy explained for Johnny: Sidey's a regular man. Clement doctors only when needs be, an' then he's offen drunk. Howso, Clem will bring Sidey if it can be done thataway."

Miriam Kennedy nodded, and said to Johnny: "That won't be forgotten, Johnny. And I'm going to suggest that yuh stay in the ranch house."

"Why, ma'am—" Johnny went a furious red. "I'm mighty obliged fer the idee, but I reckon it might cause a mite o'jealousy among the others, seein' that I started as a rider. I'm mighty obliged," he repeated, and if possible went even redder.

Jim shook his head slightly, and his mother accepted that as a verdict, but: "Any time yuh want to change yuhr mind, say so."

Afterward, Jim told her that he agreed with the reasons that Johnny had offered. There was no call for making dissension among the punchers, many of whom were compartively young men and had not been in the Lazy-K service long enough to understand the normal workings of the outfit. And Johnny, Jim imagined, would be happier with the men, for the time being at least.

So it was agreed.

There was a lull after that. No reports were brought in of Black's men being seen on the range, although men from the other three camps arrived; only the south camp had suffered, and that was usual enough during Black's raids.

Jim made arrangements for the south camp to be reinforced with men, and after that had been done he said to Digby, Nevada, Arizona,

Colorado and three-four others who were gathered outside the bunkhouses: "To me, it looks as if the coyotes reckoned they would attack the south camp last night, an' find only two've our men there. They had a surprise, an' I'm hopin' it won't be the only surprise they're goin' t'get. Howso—Digby will need sleep, an' so will I." Johnny turned in after that.

IF DURING the next few days he chafed somewhat at the continued inaction, he made no comment, not even to Jim. By the third day many things had settled themseves. Doc Sidey had arrived with Clem, and had put Miriam Kennedy's mind at rest. Dan would recover well enough, and probably sooner than was expected. The doctor stayed for three days, and then left, after giving instructions for nursing and treatment. There was medicine needed, however, to help Dan's convalescence.

"I'll ride in for it," Jim had said.

There had been no further trouble near the south camp and the passes into the mountains were watched regularly yet yielded no results. After a week, a report was brought in that two of Black's men—or at least strangers—had got past the guards and made their way into the mountains.

"Isn't it possible to find the hideout?" Johnny asked.

"We-ell" drawled Bill, "it's not impossible, Johnny, but we've been tryin' for years, an' we haven't succeeded. That range've mountains is mighty big, an' Black's a crafty snake who makes sure he leaves no trail. Howso, what puzzles me is that after a week of no action, his men go *in* the mountains."

"Meanin' what?" asked Arizona Pete belligerently. Jim smiled, the easy smile which fitted him so well. "It's thisaway, Pete. I've wondered all the time why Black was as close t'Blue Clay as he was that day, an' I reckoned he was there t'meet someone from the township. Now—I'm suggestin' those two riders came *from* Blue Clay. Black wouldn't have men campin' out fer nuthin'. He's been restin' those he's got left for more rustlin.' I'm mighty interestd in those two men, an' I guess I'm goin' into Blue Clay t' find out what I can about them."

Pete pulled at his fat chin. "Listen, Jim," he protested. "Three days back yuh was in Blue Clay t'get the medicine from Doc Sidey. Yuh could've made all the inquiries yuh wanted then. Why didn't yuh?"

Jim smiled. "I had other things t'do, Pete. An' stop tryin' to argue the leg off a mule, dang yuh. Johnny"—they were outside the ranch house in the cool of the evening—"yuh'n me an' Bry will ride into Blue at sunup, so yuh'll be advised to turn in early t'night."

"Suits me."

Jim went into the ranch house, to meet Sue coming out. Not for the first time he reflected on the comeliness—and the loveliness—of his sister and his lips twisted dryly when he saw her walking with Johnny Digby away from the corral. For some seconds he stared at them through the open window, and his mother came to him unperceived.

"What's on yuhr mind, Jim?"

He turned, smiling a little. "Them two. I'm wonderin' how it will work out."

"They're suited."

Jim raised his head, and he was suddenly unsmiling. "I'm hopin', Ma. We'll see."

10

BLUE CLAY presented a different appearance to Johnny Digby the next time he saw it, although he acknowledge that the difference was mostly in the way he looked. The same weatherbeaten signboards and the same store fronts in need of painting, the same hotels that claimed to be the best in Blue Clay, and the same

pool parlors claiming to have the best in Blue Clay, and the same pool parlors claiming to have the best equipment in Texas. The township was somewhat busier.

Jim's eyes widened as they rode in. "The YB's in town," he said casually.

"I seen some M.M fellas," volunteered Bry.

"Looks that way. I'm wonderin' why; howso, we'll find out."

"Who're yuh goin' t'see first?"

"Howlett." Jim he frowned as he uttered the name. It was difficult to say why he disliked Sheriff Howlett. The officer was a Texan whose family had been in Blue Clay for a long time, and there was little question of his respect for his position. He had been elected time and time again, with no opposition, and there had never been any whisper against his reliability. Moreover, Graham Kennedy had no objections to him, and Bry and Dan had always scoffed at Jim's dislike.

Nevertheless, he always walked warily where Howlett was concerned. It may have been that the other's sharp manner was the explanation, and his own quickly voiced suspicions of anything he did not inaugurate himself. He was fully conscious of his position as the upholder of the law in Blue Clay, and at times was arbitrary and officious.

Johnny had never met the man.

The three reached the sheriff's office, and tied their horses to the rail. Bry went for water, while Jim said: "Come with me, Johnny. Howlett may want t'talk to yuh about yuhr sister's affair."

Johnny nodded.

The sheriff's front door was open, and old Nat Heep was sitting in a corner, on a swivel chair and with one leg up on his large desk, one eye closed and the other screwed up to a narrow slit while he read a paper on which the writing was in big enough letters for a man with normal sight to see at twenty paces. Nat Heep, Howlett's first deputy, was an office man only, but he had never been able to show any particular reason why he should claim the salary.

His desk was an appalling muddle of papers, string, knives, Colts—often taken from strangers who had ridden in and not stayed long enough to claim their irons after being jailed for drunkenness or disturbing the peace while sober. There were layers of dust which showed the more because of fingermarks showing where Heep had felt for papers. There were pencils, quill pens, ink trays, India rubbers, paper fasteners—those and a hundred more oddments, some of which seemed never to have been moved or dusted in years.

"Sheriff in?" Jim asked in a flat voice.

Heep continued to stare at what he was reading, and Johnny felt impatient and annoyed. Jim made no sign either way, and Heep at last took his one leg from the desk. "Well, sirree—why, Jim, me boy, Jim, I never knowed it was yuh or I wouldn't've kep' yuh waitin', yuh know that, doan yuh, me boy?" Heep, now that he was on his feet, proved to be a small, thin-shouldered and narrow-chested man with straggly yellow whiskers and a mustache which drooped and wiggled with every movement of his lips. His eyes were watery and even when he was not reading they were screwed up as if they hurt. "Well, me boy, what c'n I do for yuh?"

"Sheriff in?" asked Jim, in exactly the same voice.

"That's so, that's so, but he's mighty busy, Jim. C'n yuh come back in—say—in say an hour or a li'l more? Go'n have a drink me boy; Dando'll be glad t'see yuh, I'm sure."

"Heep," said Jim mildly, "I didn't ride in from the Lazy-K for the sake of hearin' yuh shootin' yuhr mouth, nor to wait an hour for Howlett. Let him know I'm here."

"But, Jim—"

"On urgent business."

HEEP shrugged his weedy shoulders and disappeared through a door which was ajar. Johnny stared in surprise at Jim, who simply winked. And after winking he

glanced toward the desk where Heep had laid down what he was reading. Had Johnny not been there Jim might have picked it up. As it was there was little time, for the door opened and Heep entered. "Sheriff says he won' keep yuh five minutes, Jim."

"That's fine," said Jim Kennedy. "Yuh'll wait here, Johnny. I won't be more'n two-three minutes."

Heep's head jerked up, and he moved as if he would follow the Lazy-K man, but something in Jim's expression had warned Johnny to expect it, and he grabbed the clerk's shoulder. "Say, mister, there's one—two things I want t'talk t'yuh about. Can yuh spare me the time?"

Heep stared at him short-sightedly, and then at the door from which Jim's figure had disappeared. He grunted, and then said that he had no time to waste. Johnny framed two-three questions to explain his grab at the other, while Jim Kennedy went immediately to the back of the sheriff's office.

He was not surprised to see two horses in the yard, but he was surprised by the horses. They were clean-looking cayuses, had lines which suggested thoroughbreds—and what was more, they had a suggestion of the raciness that track racers might have shown. They were saddled, one saddle well worn, the other new—but both of good quality, and both with the characteristics of the East. There was nothing of the cowboy's made-for-comfort about them. "Foreign-lookin' saddles an' foreign-lookin' broncs," said Jim, *sotto voce.* "I wonder why yuh're so anxious t'finish with them afore seein' me, Howlett?"

There was good cover for him where he was standing, and after three-four minutes he heard footsteps, and then Howlet's voice on a low key: "All right, all right—I'll see t'that fer yuh."

A sharp, carrying voice said: "Don't make mistakes on it, Howlett."

"Nossir, I won't."

"Excellent," came another voice, and this time it had the sing-song quality of a Mexican, and the suavity of a type which Jim heartily disliked. "Ex-*celent,* Meester Howlett. An' if yuh are in trouble, yuh send to Diego, yes?"

"I'll send word," Howlett was gruff-voiced.

"Yuh weel remember, I am sure," said the man who called himself Diego, and to Jim Kennedy it seemed that there was something of a note of menace in the smooth voice.

All three men came into sight.

It was easy to tell Diego from the stout, heavily built man next to him. Diego was dressed in black, but his clothes were rimmed with intricate gold and silver work, and he wore a sombrero, whereas the other affected a wide-brimmed Stetson that was so new it almost creaked. The fat man's face was heavy and the mouth hard. His eyes were narrowed, his manner that of a man in considerable authority.

Both men forked leather, and both were used to it, although the fat man grunted as he cocked his leg over the saddle. And then they moved off, using a small lane that ran alongside Howlett's office-cum-house. Jim was not observed, and he slipped around to the front unobtrusively. As he reentered the outer office he was wiping his lips with the back of his hand, and Heep grinned, showing relief. "So yuh was thirsty, eh, me boy? Nuthin' like a thirst when yuh're in town, that's what I say. Y'know, it wouldn't surprise me any if the sheriff ain't cleared up them papers he was havin' to read. I'll go see."

"No need, Heep." Howlett spoke, from the door. He came through, a rangy man with a browned face, and large, almost black eyes. He was well dressed, in gray, and the sheriff's star glistened on his shirt, just beneath the coat he was wearing. "Glad t'see yuh, Jim. Come in. Who's this?" he added, and he looked hard at Johnny.

"A new rider've mine," Jim said.

IT WAS HARD to understand what prompted him not to give

Digby's name at that moment, but the thought did come and he acted on it. They went through into a larger room, passing the grille gates of the hoosegow as they went. There were no prisoners, and the cells looked dusty, as if they had not been used nor cleaned for a long time past.

Howlett's room was as tidy as Heep's was untidy. All the papers were in order, and there were cabinets around the walls where the files went. Certainly Howlett did his job well, even though he did not get much clerical service from Nat Heep.

"Well, Jim?" Howlett said, and Johnny Digby could not rid himself of the impression that the sheriff was putting himself out to be pleasant, although at considerable cost to himself.

"Well, Howlett, I guess I've been wantin' t'see yuh. Yuh were out've town when I was last in, an' I couldn't stay."

"That's all right," said Howlett. His eyes were fixed on Johnny for a moment, and then moved back to regard Jim. "I heard where yuh'd come, an' why. I'm hopin' Dan's not hurt bad."

"He'll ride again; how much of this talk of Black have yuh heard?"

"Most everythin', I reckon," said Howlett, and he explained for some minutes. He went on: "I sent word out for men to come in from the YB and M.M. Jim, aimin' t'make up a posse."

"No room for the Lazy-K?" There was a lash in Jim's tongue, and Howlett looked uncomfortable.

"Na-ow, don't say that, Jim. Yuh're further away, I guess, an' from what I'd heerd there was work enough t'keep yuh fellas busy. We did this in a mighty hurry, seein' that there's talk that Black's concentrated some men on the border of the M.M and YB."

"Since when?"

"The word came last night. An' the YB are ridin' mad, since they lost a bunch've cattle yestiddy, all of fifty strong."

Jim's eyes narrowed. "Fifty at one time, huh? That's figures. I guess Black is stronger this time than ever he has been. Howso, if yuh care t'make up a posse of M.M and YB without the Lazy-K, there's nuthin' I c'n do t'stop yuh. Will yuh send word t'me what happens?"

"Well, Jim, seein' yuh're here now, I guess yuh c'n join in the ride if so yuh wish."

"I've other things t'do." Johnny could sense the tension between the two men, although he had never been previously informed of it. "There's two-three things I came t'tell yuh, but most of them yuh know. One other is that a man was murdered."

"What're yuh sayin'?" Howlett barked those words.

"A man was murdered," Jim said easily. "An' I guess that Black was behind it. Fer that reason, Digby here nearly lost his sister from the same bunch've coyotes. Because Black ain't killed men before that's no reason why he shouldn't swing this time. I—what's bitten yuh, Howlett?"

Howlett had stopped eyeing him, and was staring at Johnny—so hard and so queerly that Johnny felt tense under the scrutiny. Howlett did not answer Jim's question, but said in an odd, rasping voice: "Did yuh say yuhr name was Digby?"

"That's so."

"I follow." Howlett swung around. "Kennedy, mebbe yuh c'n explain t'me how yuh come t'be shelterin' a man wanted in Austin fer murder? Don't move, Digby—if yuh do it will be the last time yuh try!"

11

THE office seemed to have gone cold. Digby's eyes narrowed, but the color went from his cheeks, and he did not argue, nor for that matter try to speak. Howlett had greased his right hand to his gun, and it was pointing to Johnny's middle. Heep had heard

the loud-voiced threat, and was standing and staring goggle-eyed in the doorway. Jim Kennedy's face had lost all expression. "Are yuh sure've what yuh're sayin', Howlett?"

"Heep—get me that form," rasped Howlett.

Heep dodged back into his office, and then entered with the form he had been reading in his hand. Howlett handed it to Jim without speaking, and Jim read:

$500.00 REWARD
WANTED FOR MURDER IN AUSTIN
MAN KNOWN AS JOHN DIGBY

There followed a brief description of the wanted man, and it fitted Johnny well enough, except that it added: *Age: about 30 years.*

But there were times when the youngster looked that old.

Jim handed the form back, and Howlett said with a sneer in his voice: "It's a new one fer a Kennedy to shelter murderers, Kennedy."

"That's so." Jim seemed remarkably unperturbed. "It's even more remarkable for a murderer to turn up in the name he's wanted by. Howso, yuh're sheriff. Johnny"—there was no change in his friendly manner, and the fact did Johnny good—"I've a few words t'say t'vuh. Before yuh c'n be moved from Blue Clay, there's a warrant needed for yuh to be taken out of the county, an' that warrant can only be issued from Austin. Right, Howlett?"

Howlett snapped: "He's wanted, an'—"

"Is there a law with that proviso?"

"Yes, but it's usual—"

"To obey the law; that's fine." Jim's voice hardened. "I'm chargin' yuh with keepin' Digby here until that warrant arrives, an' I'm leavin' a man in the township t'make sure he don' travel without such warrant. Then there's another thing, Johnny. *Don' talk.* Never mind what Howlett says, or anyone else; never mind what questions they ask, never mind defendin' yuhrself—*just don' talk.* You might say somethin' they'll twist against yuh if yuh do."

"Kennedy, thisyere's disgraceful!" blustered Howlett.

"It's possible for that to happen," said Jim, "an' I don' want mistakes to happen with a man who's a friend've mine. Fer the rest, yuh c'n do what yuh like," Jim added to Johnny, and he grinned widely. "I'll be seein' yuh afore I leave town if I can."

Johnny said quietly: "Thanks, Jim."

"That's fine. Remember—keep yuhr trap shut."

"But—" began Howlett.

Jim swung round on him. "Listen, Sheriff! Yuh'd planned to send Digby out of the county, knowin' well that once he was there he was away from all friends an' any who could speak fer him. I don' agree that's the way to act, an' I don' have time t'waste with men who'd make a piece've string've the law the way yuh would. An' yuh've no right to ask questions, but yuhr manner tells me yuh were aimin' t'do just that. Waal—don't!"

He swung out of the office, leaving Howlett scowling, and Heep staring wide-eyed. Johnny watched his large figure disappear, and then sat slowly on the edge of the sheriff's desk. Howlett recovered, and snapped: "Yuh're under arrest, Digby. An' if yuh're wise yuh won't let Kennedy influence yuh too much. Take him through, Heep."

Johnny went to the lock-up without protesting, and the door clanged behind him, the key turned in the lock. He sat on the straw paillasse which was likely to have to serve him for a bed for some time to come, staring at the lock, and looking as if he could not believe that this had happened.

It was difficult to believe; one moment as free as the air, and the next in a cell that was not large enough for him to walk about in. With Howlett clearly hostile, and Jim Kennedy acting as if he had *expected* this

thing. That was the fact most difficult to bear.

Had Jim expected it? *Was that why he had come into Blue Clay?*

* * *

THERE WERE two men in Blue Clay whom Jim Kennedy would have trusted with his life, and with good reason. Both men were older than he, but considerably younger than his father, although the old man had dealt with them for years.

Cyrus K. Johnson, the banker, and Wilkie Crane, the lawyer, were not only friends of the Kennedy's but friends themselves. They had built up sound businesses in Blue Clay, and they were likely to be there until they died. Johnson was a banker; Crane had three sons, all of whom had elected to go East after being educated there and returning for a short spell to Blue Clay.

Johnson was tall, thin, cadaverous-looking, with frosty blue eyes which belied themselves, for it looked as if they could not smile although they often twinkled unexpectedly. He looked more like the lawyer of the two, for Crane was short and round, rosy-cheeked and smiling, a quick talker who sometimes had a habit of saying absolutely nothing although using a lot of words for it.

Jim called on Johnson, and asked him to go with him to Crane. The former raised no objection, and a little more than fifteen minutes after Johnny had seen Jim leave the sheriff's office, the three men were closeted together in the big room in which Crane conducted most of his private business. It was a room pleasant to look at, and showing the nice touch of the lawyer's wife's handiwork.

There was coffee on the desk waiting.

Jim smiled. "Yuh don' lose much time, Crane. Howso, I won't say nó to coffee, even though I'm feelin' like stronger liquor."

"Say the word," said Crane immediately, although his rosy face straightened, and Johnson's eyes lost their gleam.

"Call that a joke," said Jim. "Now I want t'tell yuh two fellas a story, an' I want t'be sure that yuh both hear it so that no one c'n say that one or the other has imagined more or less than I've said. Yuh follow."

"Go on, Jim," said Crane, sitting back in his swivel chair with his plump hands clasped in front of his fat stomach.

Johnson sat upright in an easy chair, staring at Jim.

Jim told the story of the Digbys, as he knew it. And when that was finished he told the story of the murdered man on the mesa. To support the latter he took the crumpled envelope from his pocket, and then he went on: "Well I saw sev'ral ways've lookin' at it; the dead man could be another John Digby, but t'me that seemed t'stretch it beyond reason'ble probability. Or mebbe the man I know as John Digby actually took the man's name, either before or after he died. The other way was that Johnny could have put these letters an' this name in the dead man's belt. I'm tellin' yuh," he added soberly, "the ways I looked at it."

Crane pursed his red lips together. "Well, Jim, I'm not sayin' the ideas aren't good. But I'm wondering a lot if yuh had any reason fer thinkin' that way at all. Either way, I mean."

"There was this reason: Johnny, as I shall continue t'call him until I know dif'rently, clearly had some trouble on his mind. T'me, he didn't look a killer—but murderers don't always look that way, I know. At all events, Johnny was hidin' somethin'. It might have been about the murdered man, it might have been somethin' else."

Crane said: "I can see more, now."

"But," said Johnson, "why should Digby—and his sister, I presume—take another man's name?"

Jim grinned. "Their own didn't appeal to them for any reasons which could number one to one hundred."

"Yuh know yuh're suggestin' that Digby planted this paper on the dead man in order to make it seem that he was dead," said Crane quietly. "No man tries to make out a thing like that unless he's gotten something

mighty heavy on his conscience."

"That's mebbe," said Jim.

"Why not ask Digby for his story?" said Johnson.

JIM FROWNED, and was silent for a moment. "Until we came into Blue Clay, I had postponed it, believing he had trouble enough an' seein' no reason fer addin' to it. He proved himself t'have all the courage a man should, an' if yuh'd seen him ridin' into what looked like death the other day yuh'd say the same's me—there's no bad in him. Ridin' in, I reckoned it would be as well to hear what he had t'say. But on arrival I found that there were M.M and YB men in the township. I wanted to know why they weren't on the range while Black was around. I suspected Howlett was forming a posse an' not worryin' to ask the Lazy-K." Jim shrugged. "Mebbe that annoyed me. Anyways, I mentioned Johnny's name, although for some reason earlier I'd decided not to. Before I could wish I hadn't he was under arrest. Anythin' he says will be heard by Howlett. If his story is one that Howlett shouldn't hear, it's better not said."

Crane pursed his lips again, and there was silence for some minutes, Johnson had a habit of crossing his legs and swinging one foot over the other. He did then, and Jim watched the banker's polished shoe swing to and fro. Finally Crane said: "If yuhr Digby didn't kill the man in Austin, he'll haff t'talk. I can't see it will matter if Howlett hears. Yuhr Digby might be guilty've some other count, but murder—"

Jim said: "Johnny's got t'tell his story on his own, *or his sister* can. All I want t'make sure is that before the warrant comes t'get him out of Blue Clay, I've talked to Stella Digby. My idee is that Howlett will try t'smuggle him out. It's illegal, but often enough it's done."

"I'll present him with an injunction," said Crane promptly; "he won't override that easily."

"That's fine," said Jim. "An' now one other thing. Which've yuh know a man named Diego in the township?"

Neither did; and neither could identify the fat man who had been with Howlett. "I'll make inquiries," Crane promised. "No word will go out, yuh c'n rely on that. An' I'll see about that injunction. Meanwhile, what do yuh think of Black's effort this time?"

Jim said quietly: "It's strong—an' bad. I don't like the look've it, but I guess we'll beat him. I'm ridin' fer home right now," he added, standing up. "Bry will be around t'keep an eye on Johnny an' visit him from time t'time. See that Bry has someone watchin' him, will yuh?"

Crane and Johnson promised that they would.

Both men were troubled. Jim Kennedy would not have gone to the lengths of having Bry secretly watched unless he had suspected the possibility of an attack on his brother. One way and the other, the lawyer and the banker suspected that Jim had more ideas than he cared to share with them, but they had nothing to say against that; at times it was better not to know things.

Jim saw Bry, and explained the situation Bry's reaction to the news of the arrest was at first one of sheer disbelief, but Jim left him in no doubt. Bry frowned, clearly worried.

"Yuh'll recall what I said—an' Dan—after yuh'd hired him, Jim. There was somethin' on his mind he didn't aim t'tll us."

"It's so. But he's deserved a square deal from us, an' he'll get it. My guess is that he's guilty of nuthin' that need make him ashamed. Show yuhrself to him three-four times, an' don' let him get the idee that yuh've doubts've him. An'," added Jim somewhat heavily, "if yuh find that's difficult, pretend he's his sister."

Bry grinned. "Yuh old devil! Okay, Jim, I'll see Johnny, an' I'll see he gets what food an' drink he needs."

"That's fine; I'm hopin' I'll be in town early t'morrow mornin'. Yuh just make sure Johnny stays in the hoosegow, an' no one gets him out fer any reason."

"It's good as done." Bry rode to the end of the main street with his brother, and then turned thoughtfully back. Halfway toward the sheriff's office, he passed Lecky's saloon, and Dando was standing in the doorway. He beckoned, almost imperceptibly, and Bry went in.

Dando said in a husky whisper: "Three fellas, strangers t'me, rode out the back way the same time's yuh an' Jim left. I didn't like the look've them, Bry. That's so," added Dando, and his eyes rolled. "I didn't like the look've them. Killers, I thought, the minnit I set me eyes on them, an' it ain't offen I'm wrong about a man. Look't that fella Digby, wot's got arrested for murder. I suspected him. I said to myself that Jim was makin' a mistake, an' now take a look-see. What're yuh goin' t'do about Jim, Bry? Yuh goin' t'let him be followed?"

Bry Kennedy did not immediately answer; but he knew that he would soon have to make up his mind.

12

DIFFERING thoughts flashed through Bry Kennedy's mind as he walked past Dando with a nod and a smile. Dando so rarely came to the door that Bry knew the barkeep was anxious that nothing he said should be overheard by any of the men inside.

There were fifteen or twenty, mostly YB and M.M riders, including the saturnine Guess of the former, and Corny West, a tall, flaxen-haired man with handsome features and a flashing smile, who was foreman of Matt Marsh's outfit.

Most of them called out to Bry, and a dozen offers of drink were made. Bry accepted West's. West was of an age with Jim Kennedy and, in their early days, they had seen much of each other. Even now West was a regular monthly visitor to the Lazy-K.

"Yuh look mighty thoughtful," West said, as Bry downed his drink, and the youngster smiled.

"Wouldn't yuh be if yuh'd been makin' friends with a man arrested for murder? I'm tellin' yuh, Corny, I feel mighty sick about the whole business. C'n yuh spare me a minute?"

"Or an hour." West's handsome face showed disgust. "If Howlett stays much longer decidin' which men will ride in his posse I reckon I shall grow corns where they wasn't meant t'be." They moved to one side, out of earshot of the others, but watched by several men. Others—men Bry did not recognize—were looking at their reflection in the long mirror, which now showed Dando's back and the close-cropped hair of his head.

Bry said: "Corny, Jim's just ridden out, an' some strangers are on his trail. Will yuh ride?"

West drew a deep breath. "Did they leave from here?"

"That's so."

"I saw them," said West, narrow-eyed. "There's six-seven strangers in Blue Clay, an' I've been wonderin' why. Surely, Bry, I'll ride with two've my fellas. Yuh're not comin'?"

"Nope—I've orders."

"How yuh fellas do what Jim tells yuh is a thing to marvel at," said West, and although he smiled he was half serious. "I'll hit the trail, old son."

"Thanks a lot," said Bry, and meant it.

West and two more M.M men left the saloon a few minutes afterward, and Bry saw that they were watched by the remaining strangers. He himself slipped out of the back way, to the stables of the saloon, which was also a hotel. He saw the trio start off, and would not have been surprised had others followed them. No movement was made from the saloon, however, and puzzled and yet relieved, he walked slowly toward the sheriff's office.

He wondered what Jim could have said about Digby.

He recalled his own and Dan's earlier prejudice against the newcomer, a prejudice occasioned only by the fact that both of them had thought that Digby had lied about where he had come from. Jim had seen that, of course—Jim missed nothing. Yet he had chosen to take Digby at his face value, even before he had heard of the sister.

Bry's lips softened. Stella was likely to make that happen often. He shrugged, and entered the office. Nat Heep was bending over his desk, scrawling something out in a huge ledger which the old man found it hard to lift to and from his desk, but which was too large to stay there all the time. He glanced up, screwed his eyes even more, and said in his high-pitched voice: "What d'yuh want, Kennedy?"

There was hostility in the old man's voice, and Bry knew that it was only because Howlett was hostile. Heep was a mirror of the sheriff's mood.

"T'see the prisoner," Bry said.

"Well, yuh can't, an' yuh needn't hang around."

Bry colored. Heep's manner was offensive, and Bry was not used to it. He slipped one hand to his belt and said quietly: "It's usual t'see prisoners."

"Well, yuh can't. I been given orders not to let anyone see him. An' I obey orders," grunted Heep.

Bry drew a deep breath. "Yuh can ferget them. I—"

THE DOOR that led to Howlett's own office and the cells opened abruptly, and Howlett came through. The pale-faced sheriff was clearly in a bad temper, and his dark eyes were glittering. "Yuh've said too much, Kennedy. Don' come in this office uttering' threats, or yuh'll be where Digby is. An' if yuh want t'be associated with a murderer that's no business of mine. We need the room yuh're takin' up."

Bry's eyes glittered. His right hand stiffened, for he had to stop himself from going for his gun. That would be crazy, he knew, and yet Howlett's manner asked for it. He hesitated, for he meant somehow or other to see Johnny, and yet for the moment he could see no way of doing so without using force.

"If yuh don'—" he began.

"Get out!" snapped Howlett.

Bry saw red, then. His hand touched the ivory, taking Howlett and Heep completely by surprise, but before he had the gun out there was a sharp voice from the street door. "Bry, a moment!"

Startled, Bry turned—and he saw Wilkie Crane entering. He also saw Crane's eyes on his gun, half out of the holster, and he knew how crazy that quick action had been. He slipped the forty-five well back, and took his hand off it like a hot coal. Crane went on as if nothing had happened. "Have yuh seen Jim lately?"

"Most twenty minutes back, I guess."

"Too bad," grunted the stout lawyer. "I wanted another word with him, and reckoned he might be here. Howso, it can keep. Ah, Howlett. I've come to see you about the prisoner Digby. I've been asked to issue an injunction stopping yuh or anyone from sending him out of Blue Clay." A stiff blue paper came from the lawyer's inner pocket, and he handed it to the sheriff. "That's in order, I guess.'

Howlett did not take it, but let it fall to the desk. "Digby won' be moved," he said slowly. "But if any Kennedy comes in here without good business I'll put the bracelets on him an' ask why afterwards."

Crane's voice was sharp—much sharper than might have been expected from so mild and friendly a man. "That loose talk is so much waste breath, Howlett. What did yuh want, Bryan?"

Bry had fully collected himself, and was glad that his hot temper had not brought him into trouble. "T'see Digby, Mr. Crane."

"O-oh. Well," said Crane, "there's no obligation on Howlett's part t'let anyone see Digby except his lawyer,

an' anyone who visits with his lawyer. It isn't usual for that rule t'be enforced, but if Howlett feels that, why, it's no use arguin'. Howso, I'm Digby's lawyer, an' yuh're with me."

Bry covered a smile quickly.

Howlett looked at the lawyer fit to kill, but without another word turned and left the office. Heep took that as permission to take the visitors through, and he did so.

Johny Digby's eyes lighted up, and they talked for five-ten minutes, in undertones and yet knowing they could be heard by Howlett and Heep. Crane said little save to have himself introduced and to repeat Jim's exhortation for Johnny to say nothing.

But Bry Kennedy's chief worry was whether Johnny *wanted* to say anything.

* * *

JIM KENNEDY proposed to waste no time; it would be impossible to get to the Lazy-K and then back to Blue Clay that day, but he could reach the township after his talk with Stella well before noon next morning. He wondered as he hit the short trail, whether Stella would talk freely, and his eyes narrowed as he considered the possibility that she would not. He had more things than that on his mind, however, and not the least of them was the possibility that he would be followed.

Although he had not been into Lecky's, he had seen the several strange faces inside the saloon as he had passed, and he was wondering about them plenty. He did not see why strangers should be in Blue Clay, unless they were new riders for the YB and M.M. That was unlikely, particularly since both the outfits were carrying a full list of men, and Johnny Digby had been turned down by them both.

His gray, a rangy horse not long from mustang stage but clearly produced from a horse which had been well bred and then escaped to the wilds of Texas to interbreed with wild horses, hit the trail steadily, making far more speed than its slowish, raking strides seemed to suggest. Between Jim and the gray was a perfect understanding, born of three years of almost inseparable companionship. Jim named him simply Gray.

The first range of hills rose in front of them, and they made the climb with no appreciable slackening of pace. At the top, Jim pulled up. "Wait fer me, old hoss." He spoke absently as he slid from the saddle, out of sight of anyone who might be coming, and the gray tossed its head and waited. Jim took off his stetson and close to the top of the rise of hills he went down on his stomach. In that way he could see anyone coming for some miles, but be reasonably sure of not being observed by anyone who was close by. He peered over, and then his eyes narrowed.

Some two miles away, at the bottom of the hills, were three riders. They were traveling fast, and with some clear purpose in mind—a purpose which he suspected was to catch him up. He did not waste more time, but returned to Gray, forking leather and starting down-trail swiftly. Gray was surprised at the call for greater speed, but responded without the slightest effort. Jim reckoned that he would gain another mile traveling down while his pursuers traveled up.

But at the next range they would gain on him.

He had no doubts about being able to outdistance them, provided he met no obstacle on the way. He was by no means sure that the trail would be free of obstacles. Black's men were frequent, and placed all about the range, his own as well as the YB. It was most likely that the trail was being watched, and there were a dozen places where a man—or a party of men—could wait off-trail and give no hint of their presence.

Nothing happened for a while.

He was three parts of the way to the Lazy-K before he saw any sign of other men again—and then he saw four or five riders, off-trail and rounding up a dozen or more beeves which had strayed. He heard the shouting the bellowing of the beeves,

and the bellows of the men. Twice he heard a shot, fired into the air.

His lips tightened, and his eyes showed a cold anger. Rustling—within a comparatively short distance of the Lazy-K, and on a part of the range which Black had never dared to tackle before! It showed the increased daring of the rustler, a daring which could only have been given him by a certain knowledge of his own strength!

The noise that the rustlers and their victims were making drowned any sound of Jim's approach. Not for a moment since he had seen what was happening had he doubted what he must do. And in his mind there was the knowledge that every man less in Black's outfit would be a man they did not have to reckon with later.

He was within easy range when he opened fire; he used only his right-hand gun, taking careful aim. A man was out of the saddle before the sound of the shot went out—and another fell a split second later. That was all he could manage by surprise. He saw the others—four more, in all—swing around and rear their broncs, and then race in different directions, to spoil his aim. They went into the small herd of cows, making it impossible for him to pick them off—and he knew that he had little time to spare then.

When they realized they were being attacked by a single rider they would take a chance.

He put his knees into Gray's sides, and the horse went like the wind. Bullets flew past him, but caused no damage, for he was swaying in the saddle, guessing their reaction. He had lost only a few minutes in the ride from the trail, but he knew that those minutes would be almost enough for the three men who were following him to catch up with the rustlers.

That would make odds of seven to one.

But there was satisfaction in his mind at the thought of two men dead or wounded, and the attempted rustling stopped for the time being. He was out of range of six-guns by then, but the crack of a Winchester told him that they meant to stop his getaway at all costs. He kneed Gray to even greater efforts, and the rangy bronc responded—but by then, Jim saw as he turned his head, the other three riders had joined forces with the rustlers, and the chase was on with a vengeance.

He had a lead of some half a mile; it might be enough, but with ten miles or more to cover before he was within reach of the Lazy-K, there was plenty of chance that a lucky shot would get him, and slow him down. He rode low in the saddle, Indian fashion—and all the time the thunder of hoofs and the occasional crack of a Winchester was in his ears. And from time to time a little spurt of dust kicked in the trail just ahead of him, showing that their aim was good.

13

TEN MILES between him and safety; had it been a ride for life on an open range he would have had no anxiety. Gray could have shown a clean hoof to any of the others. But the distance between Jim and the leading rustle was less than half a mile, and there were the rows of hills ahead. They would be able to get within easy rifle-shot while he was forced to climb slowly to the top. Those were the danger points, and he knew that riding right or left would be useless; it had to be straight on.

He rode with his eyes narrowed and yet a light in them as though he were full of the zest for the chase, his large body, well knit and well up on the neck of Gray swinging to the swift rhythm of the horse, which seemed to understand the urgency and to know that each step meant a step to safety. Man and beast, like one being, swift and unerring toward

the first of the row of hills a mile or more away.

Thunder in his ears from the seven behind him.

Twice he glanced over his shoulder, seeing that they were stringing out, two men almost level in front, and the others singly and well behind. The danger was from the leaders.

He was carrying a Winchester, but it would be useless to try to use it while riding at that pace, and the opportunity might not be there later. He felt Gray straining beneath him, and knew it was because they were on the slightly upward rise again; in a matter of minutes the horse would have to slow down, with the steep and in parts rocky trail ahead of him. But the trail was clear, and offered no sign of shelter. He knew it as well as he knew every piece of wood at the Lazy-K. He could remember riding this trail on his father's horse, in a wagon, in a small couch—and it had been wonderful—he could remember his first pony when he had ridden alone and full of pride. It was as familiar as anything there would ever be in his life, and he knew that in this ride it could not offer shelter.

Up—up—up.

After a period of silence the shooting started from behind him, and the bullets were perilously close. Another glance over his shoulder and he saw that the others were at the foot of the hills, one of them starting to follow, the other sitting still in the saddle and taking careful aim.

Jim felt the tug at his hat, but it was not pulled from his head. He knew that another two inches lower and the bullet would have killed him, but he had no thought for it. Gray was straining under the unusual pressure of the climb, but the brow of the hill was no more than a hundred yards away from him.

Could he reach it? There was a drumming in his ears with the strain but he was hardly conscious of it. He could just hear the cracking of the rifles, and twice he saw the bullets peck on the trail just ahead of him.

Up—up—up. He could make it.

He knew that Gray could be relied on, and he half turned in the saddle, to judge the others' approach. Four in all were on the hillside behind him, and the others were shooting from below. He reached the top, and he felt like shouting at the top of his voice—*and then Gray stumbled.*

The horse tried desperately to save himself from falling, but there was no chance. Jim flung himself clear, and landed on his feet. He could hear the whine of bullets close to him, and ducked low—but as he went Gray was on his side, screaming in a low-pitched tone, as if he knew that he must not give away what had happened.

JIM SAW the trouble in a flash. It was a bullet wound through the leg, one that would mend with care but which made it impossible for the horse to carry him. Gray was struggling to get on all fours, stopping only at Jim's: "Lie there, hoss. Yuh'll be all right."

He slipped his rifle from his shoulder and lay flat on his stomach. Walking along the trail or among the hills was useless, for there was no shelter to offer cover. He had to stop the men as well as he could, and the only way was to kill them.

But the odds were likely to be too heavy.

All seven were riding now, believing that he had reached the top and was well down on the other side. It was an advantage, for they came in a cluster, and he fired three times in quick succession, each time bringing a man from the saddle, although he doubted whether his shots had been fatal. He saw the others spread out, guessing what had happened, and then they began to approach him from four directions, ducking and weaving and taking advantage of what small cover there was for them as they approached. The barrel of the rifle was hot in his hands, and he put it aside. The steady thud-thud of approaching hoofs drew closer, and he watched, tight-lipped, unable to shoot, since the six-gun would not carry the distance with any accuracy.

Four men—stalking him as they would stalk a bear: two had reached the ridges on either side of him, out of six-gun distance, and there was nothing he could do to stop them. He heard the cracking of Winchesters again as they fired from either side. A bullet cut through his shirt, and he marveled that he escaped without further damage.

But it could not last; a bullet pecked not two inches from his nose, on the trail and kicking up a spurt of dust which flew into his mouth and nostrils. He spat it out, in a curiously calm and detached frame of mind.

And then he heard shooting from further down.

He had been waiting in the hope of one or the other of them getting close enough to take the lead from his six-gun. He was out of ammunition for the Winchester, although their wary approach suggested that they thought his inactivity was a trick He could see the men clearly enough, but he had stopped looking down the hill —and when he did glance that way, and heard the shooting, he saw three men riding toward him.

The rustlers changed their tactics started shooting, long-distance, at the newcomers. Jim felt a tremendous relief, knew that he had been reprieved, although so far uncertain of his eventual safety. He began to crawl along the ridge, aiming to get within Colt distance, but as he went he saw two of the rustlers turn their broncs, and start riding away. The others followed.

Jim stopped crawling, but kept on his stomach. His hat was gone by then, and his face dirty with dust and sweat; his shirt was torn, and there was a trickle of blood from a small cut on his shoulder. But he was safe —and he had looked at death.

The thunder of the three approaching riders was like music. He recognized West.

THE M.M FOREMAN'S hat had blown from his head and was held only by the strap, and his brilliant flaxen hair showed. Jim smiled to himself at the sight of it, and when the rustlers were reasonably out of rifle-shot, he stood up. West and his two men drew up, West in the lead. "Goddamighty, Jim, we thought we'd be too late!"

"Their aim was so bad they gave yuh time," Jim drawled. "But I'm admittin' I've never been so glad t'see men as I am t'see yuh. What've yuh passed?"

West grinned, but soberly. "Enough rustlin' varmints t'tell yuh've been shootin' straight. We didn't stop t'help them, seein' that yuh might still be in trouble, an' when we heerd the shootin' I reckon we ree-lized that the luck've the Kennedys was still with yuh. Yuh hurt bad?" he added, almost in the same breath.

"Nope." Jim looked with surprise at the blood on his shoulder. "I didn't ree-lize that I'd been hit, that's how bad I'm hurt. Howso—how'd yuh three come?"

West and the others, hard-bitten punchers, grinned. "Bry was so skeered for the safety've his li'l brother," said West, "that he asked us t'ride after yuh. I reckon he had a right t'be scared the way it turned out."

"Bry, huh?" Jim smiled. "I guess that's a workin' partnership, not luck. Howso—one've yuh'll haff t'take me along, an' we'll see if Gray c'n hobble."

With a piece of blanket tied round the wound, Gray was able to walk, if slowly, on three legs Jim rode behind West, and they were a long time reaching the Lazy-K. A shot into the air brought Nevada and two others riding out, with a spare horse. Nevada's lined face was set in a scowl when he saw Jim.

"What're yuh aimin' t'do? Give yuhr Ma more shocks?"

Jim grinned. "Nope—savin' her from havin' them. I guess there's a lot've Black's men around, an' they doan mind what they do on the trail." he went on, and Nevada looked serious. Jim explained what had happened, and was finished with his story when they reached the ranch-

house. Miriam Kennedy was on the veranda, with Stella and Sue. "Where's Bry?" she asked swiftly.

"In Blue Clay, an' havin' a mighty good time I guess," said Jim easily, and he saw the relief on his mother's face. "I guess Black ain't started attackin' more'n two or three at a time yet. We-ell—there's three grown women and some mighty hungry men —what're yuh goin' t'do about it?"

"An' I had my way, yuh'd stay hungry," said Sue, her eyes little stars of mischief. "And yuh, Stella?"

"I don't see why not." If she read the fact that there was a message for her in Jim's eyes she said nothing.

West's men went to the bunk-room for food, and West entered the ranch-house with Jim. He introduced Stella and the M.M. foreman, and West did nothing to try to stop the admiration from showing in his eyes.

IT WAS AN hour later before the meal was finished and he had also finished reporting what had happened on the trail. Then, sitting by an open window and looking across the wooded land that was visible immediately in front of the Lazy-K he nodded slightly to his mother, and then glanced at Stella.

West and Graham Kennedy had gone out to look at the horses.

Miriam nodded back, and went out to call for Sue a few moments afterwards. Stella Digby sat for some minutes with her hands folded in her lap, as lovely a sight as Jim was likely to see. Her hair was neatly coiled about her head, and he had an opportunity for seeing the glorious blue of her eyes. Her skin was a golden brown, and the short-sleeved dress—borrowed from Sue—showed also that her arms were burned the same delicate shade to the elbow.

Her face was in complete repose, and yet her eyes seemed to ask him questions.

Jim said slowly: "Johnny's perfectly safe an' well, Miss Stella."

She moved a little, perhaps with relief. "I—I didn't think you would leave saying so long if he wasn't." she said. "Did you leave him with Bry?"

"In a way," said Jim.

He was finding it more awkward than he had expected. How would she react when she knew that her brother was in the hoosegow because of a charge of murder?

"Why don't you talk freely?" she said. "Yuh can, yuh know."

"I wonder," said Jim frankly, "if that's so. In the first place, Miss Stella, I should tell yuh this. I wasn't completely convinced by the vague story he told about looking for hire in half've Texas, an' I had reason t'believe that neither of yuh wanted t'talk much of what had happened in the past few months. We-ell—it was none've my business. I judge on my own opinion, an' not what others might think. But I reckoned there had been trouble of a kind, an' it's mighty necessary that I should know what it is."

She said, in a quiet voice and without attempting to deny the accuracy of what he had inferred: "Why must you know?"

"We-ell," said Jim, "I hope that when I've the full knowledge I c'n save him from being' taken into Austin fer a trial on a charge of murder. I—"

He stopped, for he saw the color ebb from her cheeks, and then, without giving him the slightest warning, she slumped down, unconscious.

14

THE FACT that she was sitting on the edge of a chair with wings on either side saved her from falling. He started forward, and then stopped, eyeing her for a moment in silence. Then, as he stared, Dan's voice came from one of the rooms that opened from the main room. "Stella—is Stella there?"

Jim hesitated and then his mother entered, clearly on her way to Dan. She saw Stella, and stopped abruptly.

Jim said: "If you c'd bring some water, please, I guess she'll be all right."

Miriam Kennedy knew when to ask questions and when silence was best. Her lips tightened a little, but she brought him a jug of water, a towel, and a small cup. He smiled at her, and yet she knew that he was not thinking much of what she was doing or what she was thinking.

She went into Dan's room, and as she opened the door he heard her say: "Stella's out for a breath of air—yuh doan leave that child time to live.

The door closed, and he frowned a little as he looked down on the unconscious woman. Her head was resting comfortably on the back of the chair, and her lips were open a little, enabling him to see her glistening teeth. Even when closed her eyes, fringed with the dark lashes that lay low on her cheeks, were lovely. She was breathing regurlarly, too, and there was a perfection about her that made him hold his breath.

He dipped an end of the towel in water, and smoothed it across her forehead. She stirred, and a few seconds later her eyes flicked open. He was sitting in front of her and smiling wryly. "C'n yuh use a drink?"

She stared—and then nodded.

He moistened her lips with water, and then she drank a little, putting the cup down herself and straightening up in the chair. Her recovery, he thought, was almost as swift as her collapse, and he had to admire her manner as she regarded him.

"I haff t'apologize, Miss Stella, fer makin' it come as a shock. It's worse, mebbe, because it was intended that way."

"Ye-es," said Stella slowly. "I suppose it was necessary. You thought it would be the one way to make me answer quickly."

"I'd hoped," he said.

She did not move, and her direct stare was disconcerting. "Did you—did you learn more than that?"

"No," said Jim. "I didn't wait to ask too many questions, fer I didn't want time to go too quickly. It wasn't possible to ask Johnny anything without the sheriff hearin', an' that might not've been wise. So I came back here, quickly."

She nodded. "You would do that. I—" she hesitated, and then her voice took on a dull note that he disliked. He was inwardly perturbed also, for had it been an arrest which had no reasonable explanation she would not have fainted. "I'll tell you, of course. You won't believe it."

"I'll try," Jim said, and he was smiling. "Fer the time bein' we're alone, I guess. The others won't come in."

"Thank you. I—" again she hesitated, and brushed her hair back a little wearily. "I don't know properly where to start."

Jim said: "There's one thing I was told, but I'd forgotten. It's for a murder in Austin."

"I know—I know. That's where it happened."

And the words, with their inference that Johnny *had* committed murder, was like a stab into his chest, startling, and hurting so much that for some seconds he could only sit and stare.

"IT HAPPENED three months or more again. In— March. The end of March."

"Yes."

"I—I told you a part of the story before. My parents died; we thought we were rich, and we found that we were without a penny. It wasn't easy to face."

"No," Jim said.

"But—we faced it." There was pride in her voice, and in her expression, and suddenly—in the moment—his mind cleared of fears and doubts and suspicions. The conviction cheered him, made him feel oddly elated, but he did not interrupt her as she went on. "Johnny had spent most of his summers on the ranch of a friend not far from Austin. We—we were from New York. I had never been this far West."

"Huh-huh."

"So he started to work. And when we reached Austin we discovered one of the reasons for the lack of money,

and my father's death. He had been robbed. Oh," she went on with a sudden passion in her voice, "it sounds absurd; it can't sound true! But it is! Until we reached Austin we had no idea of the truth. We knew that much of my father's money was in cattle, and that the company he owned operated partly from Austin, and in other states for that matter. But we discovered from the manager of the company in Austin that my father had been cheated out of his interests, and the interests had been bought at a fraction of their real value by—by someone else."

Jim said: "Let me put in a word. It was made to seem as if the shares were valueless; he sold out, on the hope of cashin' in on other shares later, of savin' what there was from the company that was doin' bad. An' as soon as he sold out, the company suddenly did well again. That—broke him."

"You *can* believe it?"

Jim shrugged, and there was a touch of bitterness in his voice and in his manner. "It's happened so often, Stella. Men with money take up shares in cattle companies, an' a syndicate is formed. They know nuthin' about rigs in the companies, so that it looks as if there's been a slump. The range where the beeves were is shown to the shareholders—a few dead an' dyin' beeves, brought from places where there's disease although no one else knows it. It's convincin' enough; the shareholder sells out while he c'n get anythin'. An' then the company blossoms forth again as good as new. Someone else buys the shares at full price—an' the same thing happens."

She said: "Yes—that's it."

"So," he said with a twisted smile on his lips, "it isn't so diff'cult fer me t'understand an' believe, after all."

"No." For the first time since she had recovered from her faint she smiled. "Thanks be for that! Well—we learned of what had happened. Mind you, the loss had killed my father—his death killed Mother. Yuh—yuh c'n imagine what Johnny an' me were feelim'?"

"Yes, I c'n guess."

"Well—then we heard of the man who had worked the fraud. A man named Sorenson, a Swede. Johnny went to see him; there was a quarrel, a shooting—and Sorenson was killed."

"I see," said Jim.

"He was a man of importance, and he owned a great deal of the property, not to mention that he had influence with the authorities. There was only one thing t'do; we left town, and—and everywhere we've been we've been afraid of the sherff, afraid that the description would be out. That's why I didn't ride into Blue Clay. Twice Johnny had been identified because I was with him; I dared not show myself. He mentioned it to yuh only because he had to if there was any chance of hire."

JIM NODDED, and stood up slowly, leaning against the window and looking down on her. "I'll have the names. Sorenson is the man yuh killed. Who told yuh of yuhr father's bein' cheated?"

"A man named Wilson."

"An' his other name?"

"I—I'm sure. I think it was Jabez, but that's a guess. He was staying at the Lessing Hotel."

Jim flashed: *Where?*"

"The—the Lessing. What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure," said Jim, and he smiled apologetically. "I've heerd of that place once before, an' I didn't expect t'hear of it again right now. Howso, it will find its place when the whole story comes out. Was Wilson there when Sorenson was killed?"

"I—I don't think so. Several other people were."

"Huh. Several witnesses, an' yet they let Johnny get away. Yuh brother," added Jim with an easy smile, "must have a way've using a gun that frightened them plenty. Na-ow, any other names?"

"I don't know of any."

"The company concerned?"

"The Mid-Texas Cattle Corporation."

"An' that was all?"

"To my knowledge, yes."

"Tha-anks," drawled Jim. "Sorenson, Wilson, an' the Mid-Texas Cattle Corporation; I guess that

we'll have t'do with that fer the time bein'. Anyway, it doan look t'me as if we c'n do a lot right now, 'cept that there's one thing yuh'll be glad about. I've arranged t'stop Johnny bein' taken out've Blue Clay for a while, an' the sheriff will haff t'send to Austin fer a warrant to have him removed. If needs be, I could mebbe get that warrant delayed."

Stella leaned forward, her eyes burning into his, and her hand gripped his forearm. "How will that help? He *did* kill Sorenson."

"Why, Stella," said Jim as if in surprise, "yuh never saw that, did yuh?"

"But others did!"

"Men've been known t'lie."

"Johnny admits it. Oh, don't think I'm not grateful, but there's only one chance fer him. To get him out of prison and to let us ride away again, further West. In Mexico—"

Jim said roughly: "That's nonsense, all've it! Once he's jailed he's there fer the time that the law wants him. If he tries t'break out, then the sheriff's deputies c'n shoot him on sight, an' they won't trouble t'shoot not t'kill. If he did get away, then he's be hunted from all've the way until he reached the border an' yuh'd be hunted with him. An' if yuh reached Mex'co, the two've yuh, yuh'd be in a strange country, a fugitive from United States justice, an' the fact would get around. Yuh'd find yuh were helpless—an' the Mex'cans," he added with a sharpness that surprised even himself, "like new faces—an' new women."

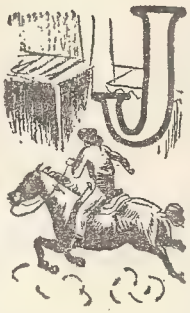
She flushed. "I can—"

"Look after yuhrself, I know. Yuh've proved it, an' I don't need more tellin'. But if yuh reckon yuh're goin' t'spend the rest've yuhr life defendin' yuhrself with a gun, yuh're wrong. It's no place fer yuh—an' I'd say the same unless yuh were with three-four men, always around. Yuh don't know the conditions in the border towns, an' yuh'd get no further. There's half-breeds, Injuns, an' bad whites, little more. There's decent Mex's, but not in the border towns. No Ma'am; we've got t'try t'find some other way've gettin' Johnny Digby out've this yere hoosegow without breakin' the door open."

"It's impossible," she said in a low voice, and he could see tears very close to the surface of her eyes.

"Nuthin's impossible," he said "I reckon there ain't no such word."

15



JIM PUSHED a hand through his hair, and went somewhat wearily outside. West was still with his father, and Jim joined them for some minutes. "I'm aimin' t'ride back afore sun-up; does that suit yuh, Corny?"

"It'll suit me fine," said West.

"That's dandy."

"I'd no idee," added the M.M foreman, "that yuh hadn't been told about the posse, Jim. It was being said in Blue Clay that yuh had been asked t'pervide men, an' refused on the grounds that yuh needed all yuh'd got t'hold yuhr own range."

Jim's eyes hardened. Graham Kennedy looked worried. "It's not a thing the Kennedys would do, Jim, an' I'm s'prised at folk believin' that had happened."

Jim shrugged, and Corny nodded. "Some didn't, I guess. I wasn't one," he added frankly. "I could see no reason fer the spreadin' of rumors, but I guess that's all it was. Howso, yuh'll bring some men so's yuh doan haff t'ride back alone this time, Jim?"

"I will."

He detailed four men in all, including Colorado Benny. It was said that Colorado, the third of the old-timers who had been with the Lazy-K since its early days, was the least talkative man in Texas, and Jim was prepared to agree that that was probable. Colorado was a little, wizened man, smaller and even more bowlegged than Nevada Bill, brown-eyed, hollow-cheeked, and with a surprising mop of hair that was red and only

just turning gray. He communicated for the most part with a series of grunts and nods, and had rarely been heard to hold a conversation in which he had to string more than half a dozen words together.

A younger rider, named Morton, was among the detail who turned in early that night preparatory to getting up two hours before sun-up. Jim had no chance to talk to Stella again: she kept to her room, despite Dan's continual calls for her. Told she had a headache, Dan looked all concern and anxiety.

Jim spent half an hour with his brother; the youngster looked pale, which was natural since he had lost a lot of blood, but he was recovering speedily, and it was probable that he would be on his feet within two weeks, and in the saddle within a month. "In time," he complained, "to've missed all the fun, Jim."

"Yuh still reckon it's fun?" smiled Jim.

"Waal, it's good 'nough t'make me want t'have another go at them murderin' coyotes," Dan said grimly. "Two goes, in fact—one fer Stella an' one fer me."

Jim chuckled, but when he left the convalescent youngster's room he wondered what Sue was feeling about Johnny.

IT WAS a little past three when he awakened, having set himself to get up at that time, and he went out to the bunk-houses, where Corny, he two M.M men, and his own party were sleeping. Or supposedly sleeping. For West was awake, and so were most of the others, and West called out to that effect as Jim opened the bunk-house door.

"An' wait fer a minnit," Corny called.

Jim swilled head and face and shoulders in a water-butt which yielded remarkably cold water while he waited. Corny came, walking easily and in the light of a moon which would soon be gone, looking more absurdly handsome than any man Jim had ever known. "How many men're yuh leavin' at the ranch?"

"Ten."

"That's fine," said Corny, with relief. "I've been thinkin', an' it wouldn't've surprised me if yuh'd left only two-three. An' with Black with all the coyotes he needs, that would've been askin' fer trouble."

"I'm agreein'. But Black's losin' men fast; he must be all of ten less than when he started, an' he can't keep that up fer long. I guess he'll haff t'teach them how t'shoot straight. Howso—I'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

"An' me."

Jim went back into the ranch-house, taking off his boots before going in so that he would make little noise. He heard no sound, but made sure that his mother and father were asleep before he left. That took no more than five minutes, and he had more time on his hands than he expected.

He thought of Gray; he had given the horse all the attention he could on the previous night, and knew that the wound would heal within a week or ten days. For the time being, however, it meant that he had to ride his second pony, a useful beast and reliable on the range, but lacking Gray's turn of speed.

He had put Gray in a box on his own, and went there. The horse whinnied as he approached, and thrust his head forward for Jim to smooth his silky muzzle. Jim talked in an undertone, as he would to a human being, and was five minutes with the gray before he walked toward the corral. In the darkness he could see nothing but a dark blur, but as he neared the gate he could see that the bars were not in position.

He frowned whoever had left the corral open deserved a sharp reprimand, but that was less important than finding if any of the ponies were missing. He decided to take a quick glance himself before going back and rousing some of the other punchers, who could make a complete count.

But he stopped thinking of that.

From the gate he whistled, but there was no sound, no movement of eager beasts. He whistled again, and still only the silence greeted him.

There was a queer constriction in his chest as he hurried forward, but even before he reached the other side of the corral he suspected what he would find.

The horses were gone! Only three were there in all—three out of fifty or more that had been there on the previous night. And they had gone with hardly a sound, without creating enough disturbance to awaken him!

16

IN LESS than five minutes the outfit had been roused and even the women were up. Dan shouted from the sick-room, demanding to know what the trouble was, and Stella and Sue went in to see him. Outside, in the growing light from the false dawn which enabled them to see the length and breadth of the corral now, the men were gathered. There was a silence broken only by the muttering of low-pitched voices, while the men separated into parties of three and four, and began to look about the wooded land which came close to the outfit on one side. West and his men, with Colorado, made up one party. Jim, Arizona and Nevada made up another. Occasionally there would be a call, and a few quick words, signifying that a bronc had been found. West's voice was raised suddenly, and he was near Jim when he exclaimed:

"Dammit, the M.M's in luck! All've our cayuses are here."

"Glad someone's lucky," came Colorado, for once stringing a sentence together.

Jim grinned, although without much humor.

"Looks t'me," said Arizona gruffly, "that yuh could do better doin' other things than grinning t'yuhself about thisyere bus'ness, Jim. All've fifty hosses were in that corral."

"Sure," Jim said. "I'm hopin' we'll find most've them."

"They've likely been driven away."

"Try borrow yuhself some hoss-sense," said Nevada scathingly, and Pete turned on him. Jim averted a row.

"Go easy, Pete. Bill's sayin' what seems likely. The corral fence was opened early in the night, an' the broncs went out in ones an' twos. If there'd been a drive or a general rush, we'd have heard all about it. That's reas'nable."

"Supposin' it is?" growled Pete, and looked round for something else to complain about. "The gate was opened, wasn't it? Who did it?"

"It could've been left open," Nevada Bill opined.

"We'll make inquiries about that," said Jim, hastily and in order to avoid a further argument. "That's if yuh fellas doan mind helpin' t'look fer the broncs that are about. We'll need twenty t'get through. West an' his fellas have found theirs, and with three others ridin' with me, that'll leave most've fifteen horses here for an emergency."

"How many are found?" Nevada asked.

He was leading two, and Pete had another. Jim saw the dark forms of two horses beneath a spreading oak tree. They came to him when he whistled, and showed no signs of having been frightened. The trio led their captured horses to the corral, and by then another dozen had been found. The woodland nearby had been thoroughly searched, however, and there was little chance of getting the other missing beasts until the daylight was better and they could search the range.

Precious time, for Jim, had slipped by, but he showed no signs of impatience when in the raw light of early morning, he called out from the top of the veranda steps: "Which've yuh fellas last used the corral?"

There was a minute of hesitation, and then a burly, red-headed man named Jacobsen stepped forward. "Guess I did, Jim. I rid in well after sun-down."

"Anyone else after that?" Jim called.

No one answered—and that meant

that no one had come in later. Had they done so they would have been seen, and by keeping silent they would have created suspicion.

"Yuh shut the bars, Red?"

"Yeah. An' three-four saw me."

That was confirmed, and Jim rubbed his hand down the back of his head. His Stetson was hanging by the nape of his neck, kept on by the strap. Inside the ranch-house doorway Sue, Stella and Mrs. Kennedy were standing and watching. "We-ell," I guess that suggests someone let them hosses out with intent an' there's guards enough around the place to've noticed any who were about."

"That ain't so," said Nevada promptly. "The guards by night is well away from the ranch-house, Jim—most've haff a mile."

Jim nodded. "I'd wondered. Fer safety's sake we'll have guards at the ranch-house an' on the trail in future. Yuh'll arrange that?" He did not wait for an answer to his question, but went on: "Any've yuh who recall durin' the day any sound that might've meant business, c'n say so to Nevada. An' I guess if any've yuh remember more'n that will report also. I'm ridin' out without losin' more time, but when I come back there'll be a full investigation. If it was done through carelessness, that's bad. If it was done deliberate, as it looks—that," added Jim grimly, "is a mighty lot worse, an' the quicker we find who the better."

A MOTLEY of faces, mostly set in anger, were presenting themselves in front of him. Red called out sharply: "Yuh suggestin' there's a renegade in the Lazy-K?"

"If yuh c'n think up one better, that's fine," said Jim. "I doan want to admit it, but it looks that way all right t'me."

Someone from the back of the crowd called: "There were strangers in the outfit, remember."

Jim swung towards the caller sharply. "An' that'l do from yuh! Guests are guests, an' no one here suggests crooked dealin' from West an' his riders in my hearin'. All've yuh ought t'know better'n that."

He walked down the steps, and the crowd dispersed. Within fifteen minutes, on horses borrowed from the recaptured strings of his punchers, Jim and three Lazy-K riders and West and his two men were riding for the Blue Clay trail.

A few miles out, West referred to the horse-freeing. "That was mighty good've yuh t'jump on the fella who suggested me, Jim. I reckon he'd some reason fer it."

Jim shrugged and smiled. "Mebbe. But mebbe not, an' I reckon the latter's more likely. Yuh rode out've Blue Clay an' saved me from getting ready fer a box. That," he added quietly, "is apart from the fact that yuh'n me have been buddies fer a long while."

West smiled, with warm appreciation. "I'm thankin' yuh fer that, Jim. But I reckon it sets yuh a big problem. It's not good t'think that there's a renegade at the Lazy-K."

"We-ell," Jim allowed, "it's not good, but it's the kind've thing that's li'ble to happen, I guess. I'm more worried as t'why it happened rather than who did it."

West frowned. "Meanin'?"

"Meanin'," drawled Jim, "that it *could* have been t'stop me from ridin' out this mornin'—or more accurately from reachin' Blue Clay the time I wanted it. There was no attack contemplated or the broncs would've been taken further away than they were, I guess. An' in turn," he added as if to himself, "that's suggestin' someone had good reasons against lettin' Johnny Digby get a helpin' hand this mornin'."

West looked puzzled. "I can't see the connection."

"Mebbe yuh will, later."

THEY FINISHED going up one of the stretches of hills then and kneed their broncs for the downward trail. A stretch of rangeland also allowed them to travel at good speed, and there was little time for talking. When they did talk they did not discuss Digby nor the horses. West was

pre-occupied with the rustling, and still further with Howlett's apparent determination to keep the Lazy-K out of the posse.

"If I were yuh," said West, "I'd make a point've arguin' about that pretty strong, Jim. Howlett's taken a mighty lot on hisself."

"If he wants it that way, I can't stop him."

"Mebbe yuh could try, an' not only fer yuhr own sake," said Corny West.

Jim looked up, sharply questioning, and the other went on: "The YB and M.M aren't all that strong, Jim, an' Black seems t' have most all the men he needs fer this attack. I'd say he's got hisself thirty or forty, an' mebbe more. We-ell, if by chance he was t'wipe out the YB or M.M or both've them, he'd be able to attack yuh with a better chance've winnin'. An' without yuh he might beat us an' the YB."

"That's just possible," Jim admitted quietly. "Are you suggestin' Howlett might be doin' a split-up on purpose?"

Corny hesitated. "I wouldn't put it in those words even t'yuh, Jim. But it's a mighty queer business."

Little more was said, and after a long fast ride they came within sight of Blue Clay around midday. They approached it from the hills, and from there it was possible to see that there was some kind of excitement in Main Street. Jim's eyes narrowed, and for some seconds he sat very tensely in the saddle. And then he said abruptly: "Corny, there's a crowd round the jail."

"Waal—" began Corny.

"Digby's in there," said Jim. "I guess someone's aimin' t'get him out. Yuh c'n ride with me or not."

He kneed his bronc, and quickened his pace so much that the yards leaped between him and West. The three other Lazy-K men did likewise. West hesitated for a moment, and then slapped his bronc's flanks. The seven men went like the wind until they neared Main Street. By then they could hear the shouting and roaring of the mob, and here-there the ugly bark of a forty-five.

The sheriff's office would be all of two hundred yards from the point where Jim and the others reached Main Street. They would have ridden straight through but for the solitary figure which launched itself from the sidewalk toward Jim. The later glanced down, and saw Bry.

He slowed his bronc, and Bry gripped the saddle, and leaped up to the front of it, with help from Jim. His eyes were gleaming with excitement, and he was breathing hard, but he managed to exclaim coherently: "They're accusin' Johnny've bein' one've the rustlers. There's twenty-thirty tryin' t'break into the jail."

"Who's stoppin' them?"

"Howlett, an' three deputies fer some," gasped Bry. "Crane found three-four others who were prepared t'make a fight, but I reckon they can't hold the crowd back fer long, an' if they try it'll be murder. C'n we get Johnny out the back way?"

Jim snapped: "Not on yuhr life. That's no way for it. I'm ridin' through the crowd," he added, raising his voice. "You-all follow."

He seemed to take it for granted then that West was with him, and there was no slackening in the pace of any riders as they neared the outskirts of the crowd. Men—and here-there a woman—looked around at the approach of newcomers, and hurriedly dodged away. Before the seven horsemen, in fact, the outer fringes of the crowd melted. There was an inner cordon, however, two or three deep. They were all armed, and were in a semicircle about Howlett's office. Howlett, pale-faced and without his coat, was standing squarely in the threshold with two guns, one in either hand. As Jim slowed down, Howlett was calling: "The first've yuh t'come closer will get lead. That's my first an' last word. The prisoner will stay here an'—"

THERE WAS a howl from the men about the office, and Jim saw in a few swift seconds that few of them were citizens of Blue Clay. Some were YB riders, and there were

M.M men among them, although he suspected that the latter were all comparative newcomers of Marsh's outfit. They were in an ugly mood. One big, brawny, sandy-haired man was carrying a lariat in one hand and a Colt in the other. He was the spokesman f the lynch-mad crowd.

"We've heerd enough of yuhr talk, Howlett. Yuh'll let that coyote go free, we know all 'bout that! But we'll have the rustlin' snake strung up sooner'n let him go. Yuh stand aside, an' yuh won' come t'no harm."

Howlett said in a low voice that carried: "Yuh've heerd me."

There was a momentary silence, and then the sandy-haired man raised his right hand, with the lariat. He was preparing to fling it, and Howlett raised his gun; but Jim moved, rearing his bronc so that by straining forward he could grab the man's upflung arm. He did so, and swung the man round toward him. At the same moment West and the others who were with him rode through the cordon and ranged themselves in front of Howlett, facing the crowd.

Jim found himself looking into a pair of inflamed, blood-mad eyes. The man tried to wrench his arm away, but failed. Bry slid the bronc, to give Jim more space for r ing.

The sandy man roared: "Yuh c'n keep out've this! We're havin' the man in there an' any who tried t'stop us is goin' t'get lead!"

Jim said very slowly: "Yuh'll be the first t'get it, stranger, an' it'll be red-hot. Blue Clay's been law-abidin' long 'nough t'know how t'deal with yuh. If yuh're goin' to order shootin', get it ordered."

And he waited, while the crowd melted away except for those with the leader of the gang, for it looked as though the battle were on the verge of starting. There was no time for Jim to realize the irony of his stand on Howlett's side now; he was weighing up the chances of a fight, and how best to start attacking the would-be lynchers.

At the back of his mind there was a picture of Johnny Digby—accused now of rustling as well as murder.

17

THE situation was ugly. Jim had no doubt of that, for he could se that in the eyes and the men ringed about him there was a recklessness caused for the most part by whisky. The men were well liquored up, and that meant that their judgment and their caution would be flung to the winds.

He wondered who had managed to get them drunk at that time of the morning. Normally there would have been little enough drinking. And he wondered who the sandy-haired man in front of him was: a burly, broad-shouldered fellow, with bold eyes which were red with anger but not with drink. The man was cold sober, and that meant that he was deliberately organizing the attempt to break into the jail and get Johnny.

There was little time for thinking. The thoughts that flashed through Jim's mind were fragmentary, impressions more than anything else.

There were moments of silence that grew into minutes.

Jim had eyes only for the man in front of him, and beneath him. He still held the thick wrist in a paralyzing grip, and although so much time had passed since he had spoken, his words still seemed to hum in the air. *"If yuh're goin' to order shootin', get it ordered."*

There could have been no more direct challenge, and for a while he thought that it would be accepted, for it looked to him as if the stranger would forget his own danger in the rage that consumed him. But he growled at last into a silence that seemed almost alive: "Yuh wouldn't talk thataway if yuh hadn't gotten a hold on my arm!"

Jim smiled, and there was more than a tinge of mockery and derision in the curl of his lips. "Is that so?

I wouldn't say a rattler couldn't bite me if I didn't shoot it. Try an' be yuhr age. What's the trouble?"

There *was* an easing in the tension, although there were angry shouts and glares from the men he was facing, and he knew that it would only take a wrong word, or a single drunken shot, to start a battle. The way in which the townsfolk had cleared away showed what they thought of the chances. Some of the bolder spirits were visible, looking from the doorways of stores and saloons but ready to dodge to cover if the lead started flying.

"Yuh know the trouble," the sandy man growled. "Digby's a rustlin' coyote an' we're goin' t'stretch his neck."

"Waal," said Jim, and he released his grip on the wrist, judging it was safe for the moment. He kept his hands away from his guns although in a position where he could draw in a flash. "It's not the first time folks've tried t'lynch a rustler, an' I guess I wouldn't be so mad if yuh could prove it."

"I c'n prove—"

Jim flashed: "How long've yuh known Digby?"

"I ain't never, but—"

"Yuh damned fool!" roared Jim. "Yuh talk've lynchin' a man yuh accuse of rustlin', an' yuh've never seen him. Who's payin' yuh t'cause a riot in Blue Clay? Who *are* yuh? Who'd yuh ride for? Who gives yuh the right t'ride in Blue Clay an' start shootin?" His voice, not drawling but staccato, rang out so that it could be heard most of the way along Main Street.

The sandy one hesitated.

Jim jumped to the opportunity, looking away from the man and covering his supporters in a swift glance. "He's got no answer, an' yuh know he's not right. Haff've yuh are YB an' M.M men, an' yuh're takin' orders from a man who's never been in Blue Clay more'n a few times, if that, a man who's bein' paid by gold from out of the country t'make trouble in it. An' he's brought men with him—killers, all an' every one've them. Men who would take the law into their own hands, an' break the law while doin' it. What're we havin' trouble with in Blue Clay now? You-all know as well's I do—with Black an' the renegade rustlers who've started cow-thievin' an' will go on doin' it until the law drives them out've the country. How c'n the law do that when yuh're aimin' to break it?"

HE STOPPED, and he saw half-a-dozen of the men look away, as if his words had got home with a punch. But there remained hostility and anger in some of the other faces, not all of those men he did not recognize.

He saw Abb, of the YB.

Abb was assistant foreman to Guess, a tall, thin, wiry man with black hair and near-black eyes. A man whose face was as thin as Mesa Joe's, but who was no more than half the old-timer's age. A man Jim had never liked, but who was a good cowman and worth all his hire to Dexter of the YB. Moreover, a man who had a considerable following in Blue Clay.

"Yuh're shootin' yuhr mouth off too much, Kennedy." His voice was cold and hard. "I'm tellin' yuh that Digby's a rustler, an' fer the past three-four days Howlett has been aimin' t'make up a posse, but doin' no more. Black's active, an' on the trail. The YB's lost all've a hundred cattle. We need an example, an' by Gawd, we're goin' to make one!"

Jim said slowly: "Not of Digby, yuh're not."

"I've got no quarrel with yuh," said Abb in the same cold voice, "but if yuh doan stand aside yuh're goin' t'get lead in yuh. Larsen's led us fer the reason we asked him to. I guess he's seen the rustlers workin'."

Jim glanced down at the sandy-haired man, and said casually: "Yuh're Larsen?"

"That's so."

"What're yuh doin' in Blue Clay?"

He would not have been surprised had the other refused to answer, but his questions were put so casually that the response came almost before the other realized that he was talking. But to Jim Kennedy it seemed as if

the answer was an automatic one, that he had trained himself to make it to similar questions. "There's a start to a loggin' camp up in the hills. We're on the way to it—all've twenty of us. On the way we saw shootin' an rustlin'. A YB man was killed. I guess me 'n my men doan wait long afore we start in agenst rustlers."

Jim said: "Each an' every word've that was a lie."

Larsen's eyes flashed. "Why, yuh—"

went for his guns, and Jim knew that it was inevitable; he had forced it. Had he had only Larsen to deal with it might have been avoided but with Abb weighing in on the man's side it would be impossible to end the argument with words alone. He was watching Larsen lynx-eyed, and he saw the quick movement to the right-hand iron. His own hands moved, and the Colts leaped into them, as if by magic. He fired four times, sent the gun rocketing from Larsen's hand, making the man grasp with the pain as the iron was wrenched away. He sent another shot so that Abb's gun went clattering, and Abb stopped moving. Two other bullets went over the heads of the crowd—but not far over them.

And at the moment of his shooting, Bry, West and the others had their irons out. It was all so fast and so quick that there was little chance of Larsen's men acting against it. Only two-three had their guns out, and Jim's lips twisted as he thought wryly of the fact that the whisky which had worked up their tempers had slowed down their hands.

He said coldly: "Well—any've yuh wantin' to start shootin'?"

No one answered. Larsen's eyes were pools of hatred, but he was useless. Abb had turned his face away, but Jim guessed it was also filled with hatred.

But no one fired after his bursts.

"I guess," he said slowly, "that yuh-all are seein' sense at last. Now I c'n talk t'yuh like sensible men, an' Howlett c'n do the same. I'm suggestin' two or three've yuh act as spokesmen, an' make out yuhr case against Digby. If yuh c'n prove he's one of the rustlers, then he c'n be tried in summary court in Blue Clay, an' if found guilty he c'n be hanged at sun-up tomorrow. But if he's not found guilty, then he stays where he is. That goes fer yuh, Howlett?"

"It does," said Howlett without hesitating.

Jim looked at Larsen. "Name yuhr men," he said

Larsen swore at him, viciously, and turned away. Abb was one of the first to follow him, and the others went in ones and twos, until only some eight-nine men were left. Most of them were M.M riders, although two YB men were among them.

An M.M man said: "Corny, I guess we was so likkered up we didn't know what we was a-doin'. Larsen an' Abb made it sound pretty sure that Digby was a rustler."

Jim spoke for Corny West: "That's disproved, more-less. If they'd had proof they wouldn't have turned my offer of talk down."

"It's so," said the spokesmen, and the others agreed. Jim's smile came again, more satisfied this time and without the mockery and the challenge which had been in it when he had looked at Larsen.

"That's fine an' dandy," he said. "How did it come yuh got filled up with liquor so early in the mornin' as this?"

The spokesman explained. There had been an attempt to rustle some M.M beeves close to the M.M and YB border. Punchers from both outfits had broken up the effort, and later had met Larsen's party. All of them had come into Blue Clay. They had been tired and hungry, and thirsty. No one knew who had started the whiskey, but it was a fact that most of them had taken some, without food in their stomachs. That had made them easy when Larsen and others had talked about lynching Digby.

JIM NODDED at the end of the story. "It makes sense. Larsen could be all he says, although I'm not one've those who believe it. How-

so, he won' make trouble again fer a while, an' by then I guess things will've altered somewhat. C'n yuh spare me a few minutes, Howlett?"

The sheriff nodded, although he was not particularly amiable; Jim could understand that. Where a man might have been expected to be grateful for being saved from serious trouble, Howlett's main emotion would be anger at the thought that Jim had squashed it when he had failed. Corny guessed at the same thing, and winked at Jim.

Jim said, without a smile: "Bry, if yuh'n the others will go to one've the saloons, that's fine, an' I'll join yuh. I guess yuh haff to avoid the saloon Larsen an' Abb are usin'."

"We'll find one," said Bry.

They rode off, and Jim climbed from the saddle for the first time since reaching the township. Howlett had already gone into the office. Nat Heep was sitting at his littered table, chewing the end of a quill-pen. As Jim entered the little clerk nodded jerkily, and said in a whining voice: "Howdy, Jim, howdy?"

Jim ignored him, and followed Howlett into the inner office. The sheriff had taken off his hat, which had made a red mark on his forehead, thus throwing the pallor of his face into greater relief than usual. He was tight-lipped, and his eyes were cold and hostile despite his words. "I've t'thank yuh fer that, Kennedy."

"Yuh doan need to," said Jim easily, Without being invited, he took a chair and sat on it astraddle. "I guess that yuh'd have kept them back once yuh started shootin'." He guessed nothing of the kind, but considered it wise to placate Howlett where he could. "Have you known of Larsen before?"

"No."

"Yuh'll check on his story," Jim said easily.

"I'll try," said Howlett. "Fer the time bein' there's more'n enough t'do without wastin' time on a party of loggers. Yuh heard that Black had been busy again on the trail. I guess he's operatin' more widely than it's ever been known before, an' it won't be easy t'beat him this time."

"I'll allow that," said Jim. "The question is, how're yuh goin' t'try? By my way've thinking, we'll have to arrange a trap fer him."

There was a tinge of color appearing on Howlett's face. "I'd thought've that. Fer that reason I didn't get the posse on the move, an' it caused the trouble with Larsen an' Abb. Howso, I'll look after that," Howlett added coldly. "If yuh've men t'spare fer the posse, I c'n use them. But that ain't the thing yuh've come t'talk about. Yuh're concerned with Digby. Waal—yuh ought t'stop. There's a man in town from Austin. He was at the hotel where the man Digby killed was shot, an' he's identified Digby. I guess that makes it a clear case he's the murderer, an' I reckon yuh're wrong in claimin' that Digby stays here until the warrant's through. I propose," added Howlett slowly, "to override that warrant, seein' that Digby's in danger of lynchin'. Have yuh gotten yuhrself any argument against *that?*"

18

JIM KENNEDY leaned back in his chair, stretched his legs in front of him, and eyed the sheriff from narrowed eyes. Except for the slight tightening of his lips, no one could have seen the tension which had suddenly sprung up in him.

Jim said slowly: "I've a lot've arguments against it, Howlett. For one, you know that although Digby is in danger here, on the trail he'll be in greater danger. Yuh yuhrself admit that Black is making things bad on the range. Yuhr posse of two-three guards with Digby would never get through."

"They could travel by night," said Howlett. "An' they will. I'm not arguin', Kennedy. I've considered the injunction that Crane presented, an'

in normal times I would have acted on it. But the laws say that if there's danger in the locality then the sheriff c'n use his judgement. I'm usin' mine. Digby's leavin' town, but I'm not sayin' when."

Jim stood up slowly. Howlett remained seated at his desk and the younger man towered over him. "Howlett, if anythin' happens t'young Digby because of yuh, yuh'll live to regret it more'n I c'n say."

"Yuh're mighty int'rested in a murderer an' suspected rustler, aren't yuh?"

"Mebbe I am. Mebbe I'm int'rested in a youngster who never knew what crooked shootin' was until he was mixed up with cattle kings an' killers in Austin. I've warned yuh, Howlett. An, now before yuh decide there's one other thing. I want t'see the witness yuh've got against Digby."

"Yuh've no right—"

"If I were yuh," said Jim very softly, "I should be careful in more ways than one. Yuh say yuh've proof. Before yuh release yuhrself from that injunction yuh'll need to take the proof to Crane. Or me," he added, and then went on: "In fact, Crane an' me. I'll bring Crane over in five-ten minutes."

He left without speaking further, and in a few minutes he was with Wilkie Crane. The red-faced lawyer heard him out, and looked grave. As Jim finished he pulled at his fleshy underjaw, and said: "In view of the attack on the jail *and* this witness no court would blame Howlett for getting Digby out've town. The injunction is worth just so much paper, Jim."

"So I reckoned," Jim said, stony-voiced. "Will yuh come an' see the witness?"

"I will," said Crane. He picked up his wide-brimmed Stetson and walked with Jim toward the sheriff's office, a dumpy little figure who barely reached Jim's shoulder. They saw Johnson in his bank, dealing with a storekeeper. Johnson nodded fleetingly as the others passed.

JIM REACHED the sheriff's office just after Howlett and someone else had entered it, and thus saw the back of a man disappearing. A shortish man, in light gray clothes which suggested he had not ridden into town, but had come by the stage. On closer sight, the man who was witness against Johnny Digby was an unprepossessing specimen. He was thin and would have been pale but for the fact that he had let his town-softened skin be exposed to the burning heat of the Texas prairie without any protection. It was red and blistered, and raw in places, and clearly gave him no comfort. His eyes were mere slits in the puffy flesh about them. But if it was impossible to judge the man's features with any honesty, there were his dude clothes, polished shoes, and his squeaking voice to show him for what he was—a townsman of the worst type.

Howlett wasted no time in introductions, and used no names. "I want yuh t'tell yuhr story," he said.

The squeaking voice grated immediately on Jim's ears. "Why, sure, Sheriff! I am a travelin' representative of the organization known as the Mid-Texas Cattle Corporation—"

Jim said softly: "*What* corporation did you say?"

"Yuh heard me, or yuh should've," squeaked the newcomer. Probably had his face looked normal he would have seemed annoyed or aggrieved; as it was, only the business on which he was engaged stopped him from being ludicrous. "The Mid-Texas Cattle Corporation, the fairest an' most gen'rous in the country!"

"I heard yuh that time," said Jim stonily. "Go on."

The man looked at Howlett, as if in protest at Jim's manner, but Howlett nodded. The squeaking voice went on: "I was stayin' at the Lessing Hotel, yessir, the best an' finest in Austin, I guess an' on that day one've my bosses was murdered. Name o' Sorenson, the finest an' squarest man that ever lived. He was murdered, shot down by a murderin' thievin' snake of a man who went an' shot him when he was without a gun

or without friends with him. Yessir, the finest an' squarest man—"

"Yuh c'n leave out the adjectives," said Jim soberly. "I'm neither int'rested nor believin'. Go on."

The man gulped. "That ain't no way t'talk to me!" Despite his protest he went on, however. "I was one've those in the room when Sorenson was shot. If I'd had a gun I guess there'd have been a diff'rent killin', yessir! I saw Digby come in, an' without speakin' a word he shot Sorenson. An' then he ran for it."

Jim said: "An yuh ran after him?"

"I didn't have a gun, but that don' signify nuthin'!" blustered the other.

"Yuh satisfied?" Howlett said to Crane.

"If he's identified Digby, I've got to be, although I strongly protest against Digby being taken out of town," said Crane.

Howlett said: When was it that yuh next saw Digby?"

"Well, I guess yuh ought t' know. I could've been knocked down by a straw when I saw yuh'd gotten him under lock an' key, Sheriff. A mighty fine capture, one've the most murderous outlaws that ever rode the trail, that's Digby."

"If yuh had yuhr way yuh'd make him one," rasped Jim. "What's yuhr name?"

The slits of eyes went even narrower. "That don' signify!"

"I agree with that," said Howlett swiftly.

"Yuh're both wrong," said Jim. "I'm aimin' to send word to Austin in the next two-three days, an' I'm goin' t'make sure that this fella stayed at that hotel. For all I know he's lying all the time. Much of what he says is lies, that's certain."

"Yuh ain't got no right t'say that," blustered the stranger. "Sheriff, I appeal t'yuh, do I haff t'be insulted by thisyere puncher? I reckon I don't!"

"Yuhr name," Jim said.

For a moment he thought Howlett would raise a strong protest, but the sheriff said nothing and the other gave way reluctantly.

"Teemer, that's my monicker, an' yuh'll find that I stay in the Lessing Hotel most every time I'm in Austin. and he turned on his heel. "Yuh've heard what I've said, Howlett."

"We know what it is," said Jim, It's—"

OUTSIDE, Crane stopped on the sidewalk, looking troubled. "Jim, I don't want t'be awkward or to make yuh think I'm not with yuh all the way, but are yuh sure of this man Digby? That was pretty certain evidence."

Jim shrugged. "I'm backin' Digby, as I did from the time I first saw him, an' nuthin' that twisted-tongued townsman said will make me change my mind. If Sorenson was at one with him, I reckon the world's better off without him."

"That's not the way the law looks at it."

"This time, me an' the law aren't agreein'."

Crane looked even more troubled. "Be careful; from what I can gather yuh've trouble enough at the Lazy-K with the rustlers. The loggers won't be pleased with yuh in Blue Clay, an' they're mighty headstrong. Yuh've got Howlett lined up against yuh, now. Don't take too many risks, Jim. It's a bad time, an' yuh've seen how whiskey can make men act wild."

Jim smiled, slowly. "I'm followin' Wilkie. Don' yuh worry about me."

"I guess I don't have to much," said Crane with a sudden smile. "Yuh'll go yuhr own way, no matter what I say about it. Are yuh comin' back to the office?"

"Fer now, no."

He strolled on, alone, to find that Lecky's saloon held Bry, Corny West, and the others. Larsen and Abb were in one of the other saloons, farther down Main Street. Dando was sweating and serving food in a hurry, but spared the time to look up and acknowledge Jim. The latter sat down between Bry and Corny, and ordered what Bry was having—beefsteak pie and potatoes, with beans cooked whole. It was good, and he enjoyed the meal, without talking once of what had happened.

It was West who broached the sub-

ject. "What're yuh aimin' t'do, Jim?"

"What're yuhr plans?"

"Wa-al, I guess I oughtn't t'be long ridin' back to the M.M," said Corny, somewhat uncomfortably. "The M.M might be attacked in a big way, an' will need all've its own men around."

"That's so," said Jim.

"An'," went on Corny a little awkwardly, "yuh'd be wise t'do mostly the same thing, Jim. The Lazy-K ain't that safe, with only ten men t'guard it."

"Yuh're right," said Jim.

West's eyes cleared. "Yuh're ridin' back?"

"I'm not stayin' in thisyere one-eyed outfit a minnit longer'n I've got to," said Jim in a sharp, carrying voice, "There's no one here who could give a square deal if he tried from now till Christmas. I'm not joinin' Howlett's posse. I'm lookin' after the Lazy-K, an' lettin' others look after themselves."

West frowned again. "If yuh an we two other outfits got together—"

"When?" asked Jim, and his voice sounded cold. "When Black's finished with the Lazy K? Nossir, I'm ridin' back, an' before I ride into Blue Clay again Black's offen the range." He pushed his chair back, and the others looked at him, surprised. West looked injured, and there was some reason for it. So much so that before Jim turned his lips smiled a little, and he added: "Corn, as soon's I've got the men in from the ranges an' made sure that Black can't do damage t'the women folk at the Lazy-K, I guess I'll come an' see yuh. Mebbe we c'n work up some means've attack."

"That'll be fine," said Corny West.

BUT THE handsome M.M foreman was frowning as Jim, Bry and the other three Lazy-K men left the saloon. Dando was staring at Jim's broad back, his mouth agape. Kennedys did not make a habit of going off like that.

"Gimme a drink," Corny said sharply, "an' don' let yuhr eyes drop out've yuhr head thataway, Dando."

"Why, sure," said Dando. "Sure, sure." He grabbed a bottle of rye and slid a glass to West's hand, but even as he did so he was looking out of the corner of his eyes toward the shadows that Jim and the others threw on the frosted glass of the door panels.

The shadows disappeared.

In less than five minutes horses clattered through Main Street, and Jim and his party were watched by many eyes. Howlett saw them go, and was expressionless. Crane and Johnson, at the latter's office, were lookout of the window, and both men were clearly troubled. At the saloon farther down the street Larsen and the men he claimed were on their way to a loggers' camp were watching, and Larsen was grinning.

Howlett watched them out of sight, and then went in to his prisoner. Johnny jumped up eargerly, hoping to see a friendly caller. His face grew expressionless when he saw Howlett.

"Fer yuhr information," said Howlett roughly, "Kennedy's been sensible, an' ridden out've town. Yuh'll be leavin' fer Austin after sun-down t'night."

Johnny Digby's expression did not alter, although the news must have seemed to him like a sentence of death.

On the trail, Bry rode alongside his brother in silence for a long way. It was one of the few occasions when he believed Jim was doing the wrong thing, and on a serious matter he could not say so easily. But as they reached the first line of hills, he forced himself to say: "Are yuh sure it's right, Jim?"

"Is what right, Bry?"

"Lettin' Digby go into Austin."

Jim's lips curved, and his eyes were gleaming. "If it convinced you, it was good, Bry. But it was wrong; Johnny Digby isn't goin' into Austin while I c'n stop it. I wouldn't reckon he had a chance, anyway, once he was past the Lazy-K. No-o," he added easily. "We're stayin' off-trail in a little way, an' waitin' fer the party from Howlett. I guess Black might be blamed fer the holdup," he added lightly. "It must be a mighty long time since Black did anythin' useful!"

19

BRY'S EYES were glistening as his brother spoke. Morton and the other two men with them were also smiling, as if a considerable tension had been eased.

"Yuh old devil!" exclaimed Bry. "Yuh surely had me caught up then! That's dandy, Jim! Yuh reckon Digby will be on the trail t'night?"

"It's my reasonin'."

"But, Jim," protested Morton, "it's an offense against the law, an' yuh're mighty strong fer it."

Jim shrugged. "T'make it truly lawful, there's times when it's necessary to act diff'rent. I guess I'm right in sayin' Larsen an' Black would never let Johnny reach Austin."

"Fer why'd yuh line up them two?" asked Morton.

"Fer the reason it's obvious t'me they're in line," answered Jim. "Larsen's no logger, nor the men with him. They're Black's men—or they're workin' fer the same people as Black."

Bry and Morton frowned. "Meanin'?" said Bry.

Jim shrugged and smiled. "I don' exactly know yet. But I reckon Black's not workin' entirely on his own, this time. He's got backin', an' powerful backin'. I'd like t'know who by, an' I guess I'll find out."

They rode in silence for a while, until Bry said gruffly: "Yuh reckon Howlett's in with Black?"

"It could be."

"But," protested Morton, a man who spoke little but usually with good sense, "Larsen was threatenin' Howlett."

"I'm agreein'. It could've been for show. Howlett was as hostile afterwards as he was before—mebbe more so. However," Jim added, "I guess it ain't no use worryin' too much. We'll ride off-trail over the next hills," he broke off, "an wait there until after sundown."

It left them with plenty of time for waiting, but Jim was backing his hunch that Howlett would send the prisoner out that night, and he did not intend to let Johnny get too far. He knew that he was taking a considerable chance, and that if he was found out he would invite trouble from the authorities. In his own way he half hoped that would be the case, because he was strongly dissatisfied with Howlett's handling of the general situation, and would not have minded saying so to any court. But for the time being Johnny's plight was the thing that had to be considered first, and directly that was settled, then they could start working against Black.

That would not be long.

They found a patch of dwarf oak, beside a stream no more than a yard wide in places, but three-four in others.

Nothing happened, and they might have been in a wilderness hundreds of miles removed from a township for all the folk they saw in the five-six hours of daylight that remained to them. They slept in turns, and with the lowering of the sun in the heavens they ate cold food, determined to make no fire which might attract attention. After it, Jim stripped mother-naked and bathed—swimming a few strokes where the river was both wide and deep enough. Apart from his face and arms his body was fair and glistening as he clove through the water, with the muscles rippling under the satin skin of his back and shoulders. There was not a spare ounce of flesh on him, and he was clearly in perfect physical condition.

Bry bathed also, but the others let the opportunity go.

DARKNESS came, more quickly than they had realized, and as the last light began to fade from the western skies, Jim said: "We'll get ready, I guess. Kerchiefs fer masks, all've uh—an' the broncs' hoofs muf-

fled. If we're goin' t'be lawbreakers fer the night, I guess we'll do it properly."

The others cooperated willingly.

In fifteen-twenty minutes they were ready, five masked riders some half a mile off-trail. They made little or no sound as they approached the trail and spread themselves along it. Jim and Bry were first, one on each side of the trail. Morton and the two others were farther along, in case anything went wrong with Jim's first plans.

Silence was about them, silence broken only by the rustling of vermin and small creatures, the occasional heavier movement of a wolf or coyote, sometimes the high-pitched call of a bird startled for some reason they could not know. For a while there was no other sound and no other movements, but some two hours after darkness Jim pricked up his ears.

Bry did the same. "Three-four horses approachin'," he whispered.

"I guess. An' mebbe our men."

So faint at first that it was hardly possible to hear them, the riders came on. Then the sounds grew clear, and they could even make out the figures of horses and riders against the star-speckled sky. Four men, riding at a good pace, but not excessively fast.

Jim, in the saddle, waited until the last moment, and then as the first of the four drew alongside, he snapped: "Reach fer the skies, all've yuh."

His voice was rasping, different from the one he normally used, and he saw that it was effective, for the men obeyed promptly. Or three of them did. The fourth sat dead still, and Jim growled: "All've yuh, I said!"

Johnny Digby's voice answered quietly: "Mine are tied, fella."

"Who're yuh? Digby?" Jim's voice remained harsh and unlike his.

"That's so." Johnny gave no sign of being afraid.

"I guess yuh're all we want," Jim said, and his voice sounded full of gloating satisfaction. "We'll be *very* glad t'see yuh, Digby. The rest've yuh move away."

A gruff voice came: "Lissen, yuh, we're a sheriff's posse—"

Jim swore. Bry was startled, not having heard him let forth before, but learned that his elder brother knew all the words!

"An'," finished Jim, at the end of a full minute of vituperation, "yuh c'n tell Howlett that he'n his star don' mean a thing t'me or those workin' with me. Yuh c'n be thankful yuh ain't been shot up, all've yuh. Ride fer it."

"But—"

"I said ride!" Jim had leaned forward and snatched the guns from six holsters before the men could stop him, and now he backed away, leading Johnny's horse. The youngster had made no protest, had shown no sign of fear, although fear must have been in him.

The three members of the posse turned their horses.

JIM LET three bullets go to speed them, and behind his mask he was smiling when they turned and disappeared. Then he turned himself, and led Johnny forward, toward Morton and the others. Johnny was breathing hard, and finally said: "Yuh're Black, I take it? How much d'yuh want t'let me go?"

Jim said, still harshly: "Yuh don't get away from me, Digby."

"Why? What int'rest am I t'yuh?"

"There's time later fer talkin'. I—why, yuh lunatic, yuh! Stop, Johnny—stop, yuh ijit!"

For Johnny had made a dash for safety. Tied as he was, he was willing to take a chance; preferred being shot at while in the saddle to being murdered when he should reach the outlaws' hideout.

Jim kneed his bronc, marveling at Johnny's inborn courage.

But his last words had reached Johnny Digby, who contrived to stop his horse. By then Jim was alongside. Johnny said in a constrained, unbelieving voice: "Jim—it *is* yuh?"

"It is," said Jim easily, and Johnny gasped.

"I—I reckon I could fall down," he said faintly. "I'd been cursin' yuh good an' proper fer ridin' out without

me, an'—but why'n hell," demanded Johnny Digby, "didn't yuh say so the moment them riders went?"

Jim chuckled: "I wanted t'try yuh out, an' more. I didn't want talk that might have reached them." He slipped from the saddle, and searched for the cords at Johnny's wrists, finding ankle cords too and suddenly scowling behind his mask. "The coyotes! Did Howlett tie yuh thisaway?"

"Yes," said Johnny.

"Did he say why?"

"He said he was takin' no chances of me ridin' off," said Johnny, and there was a hint of laughter in the youngster's voice. "I reckon Howlett has gotten hisself an idee that I'm a mighty desperate criminal, the way he behaves."

Jim said slowly: "I reckon desperate's right. Howso—yuh feelin' easier?"

"When I've got the blood back in my wrists an' ankles I will do," said Johnny, rubbing vigorously. "Yuh ain't got a touch of whiskey with yuh, by any chance?"

Jim produced a flask.

"Try this," he said, still from behind his mask, and when Johnny asked why he was continuing to wear it, he explained: "We might meet some've Black's riders, or even M.M and YB men. We're takin' no chances."

THE SUN was already shining in the east when they sighted the Lazy-K. Smoke was curling from the chimneys of the ranch house and the cook house, and there were signs of activity as they started the final run to the homestead. Halfway—some mile out—a man rode out from behind a clump of trees. It was Nevada Bill, and Nevada was grinning widely.

"Waal, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. "Yuh've made it, an' with Digby!"

Jim chuckled. "Yuh reckoned I would lose out?"

"No-o," said Nevada, with his wizened face cracked into many lines as he grinned. "I didn't, Jim. But Pete was sayin' all've yestiddy there weren't a chance in ten've yuh ridin' back safe, an' not a chance in twenty've yuh gettin' Digby! I'm right glad Pete was wrong," chuckled Nevada. "Mebbe he'll ree-lize he ain't got nuthin' of a mind t'think with now!"

Jim and the others roared.

They were fifty or sixty yards from the homestead when Sue and Stella came from the ranch house, running toward the riders. Stella's eyes were glistening, and she was some yards ahead of Sue. She reached Johnny, and his hand went down and gripped hers.

"Thanks fer the welcome, Sis!"

"Thank Gawd yuh're safe," Stella said, but her eyes left her brother's. "Jim, I won't ever be able to thank yuh enough for this."

Jim smiled easily. "I'm hopin' thanks aren't needed that bad. How've yuh all been? No trouble've any kind?"

"No," said Stella, and Sue laughed.

"An' that almost disapp'inted yuh, Jim!"

Jim regarded his sister with his head cocked on one side. "Yuh're gettin' too fresh," he said playfully. "I guess I'm makin' a mistake in lettin' yuh run around loose. No, I'm not disappointed by a long way. I'm just glad I'm back in time, 'fore the trouble starts."

He was serious, they knew.

Although nothing was said while they had food, there was a strain in the atmosphere, particularly when Jim reported what was happening in Blue Clay. For once his father was up early, and the old man ran a hand through his hair as he said: "Jim, this is more'n Black's usual rambunctiousness. Someone's after takin' a lot more from Blue Clay than a few beeves."

"Yuh're all've right. An' there's a man in Blue Clay who's had a lot've burnin' from the sun, which won' do him any harm. He," added Jim carefully, "represents the Mid-Texas Cattle Corporation, an' if Johnny's right, that corporation's about as crooked a one as there is in Texas. An' I'm askin' fer idees as t'why a representative is in Blue Clay."

20

THE elder Kennedy called Jim aside to the small office where the old man did his private writing, and which none of the others—not even Miriam—violated without his invitation. "Sit down, Jim." He sat himself, and watched his son sink into an easy chair. Jim rolled the makings one-handed, while his father stuffed a burned pipe bowl with strong weed. Jim's eyes looked tired, and yet he was alert enough.

"Jim," said Graham Kennedy, "I've given a lot've thought to the position, an' I'm not too happy about it. Do yuh seriously think Howlett is workin' with Black and this man Larsen? Yuh haven't lined Larsen up with Black fer certain yet."

"Nope," agreed Jim. "An' fer me, that's the thing I'm aimin' t'do next. I'm ridin' into the mountains, an' I'm takin' the three old-timers an' Morton. I guess Bry'll want t'come, but I'm leavin' him behind t'keep Digby compn'y, since Digby will want t'come also, an' I'm not havin' him seen on the trail with Lazy-K men. Howlett has only t'get a whisper of that an' he *will* make trouble."

Graham nodded, and looked relieved. "I'm glad that's yuhr idee. When are yuh goin'?"

"As soon as there's twenty men around the Lazy-K to make sure Black can't get away with a sudden attack. Not that I think he'll try," added Jim. "But mebbe he will. What're yuhr idees, Pa?"

"In line with yuhrs. Get Black an' Larsen connected, and then yuh c'n work the angle which way yuh like. Yuh've got it in mind that it's tied up with the Mid-Texas Corporation, haven't yuh?"

Jim smiled. "It's so. Yuh're a cagey thinker, Pa!"

He stood up and eased himself through the doorway of the small room.

The others of the night ride were already in their bunks, and Jim spent a few minutes with Nevada and the other two before following that example. To the old-timers he explained briefly what was in his mind, and he was not surprised when they agreed with him that it was the wise course.

He learned, then, that all but five of the horses released early the previous morning had returned during the day, and that those missing five appeared to have wandered too far into the hills. He learned, also, that some eight-nine riders were due in from the north and west camps that day. The cattle were in less danger in that quarter than any other, and it had been safe to withdraw the men for the defense, if it became necessary, of the ranch house itself.

Satisfied there was little more that could be done for the time being, Jim went into his small room, and stripped mother-naked before slipping between sheets. It would be hot sleeping during that day, and he wanted to be as fresh as possible for the coming expedition.

There had been no further reports of rustling on Lazy-K land, which was one advantage, even if a negative one. The possibility that Black was going to operate against the smaller outfits first and then pay attention to the Lazy-K had to be always borne in mind.

He slept easily, and well. It was mid-afternoon before he awakened, which testified to the thoroughness of his sleep and his fatigue before he had gone to bed. A bath, in a tub behind one of the bunkhouses, refreshed him all he wanted, and he walked back to the ranch house for food. He found it ready, and Stella in the room.

He smiled easily at her. "Well, Stella, I guess yuh're feelin' easier in yuhr mind."

"Much easier," she said, "and yuh'll never know how grateful I am, Jim. But I'm worried in case yuh get

yuhrself into trouble because of Johnny."

"I shouldn't let yuhrself be worried thataway," he said. "Fer my part, I don' do things without bein' reason'bly sure they're the right ones. If I'm wrong—" He shrugged. "If a man can't back his own judgment, I guess he ain't got much reason fer livin'. Howsomever, that isn't what I was aimin' t'talk t'yuh about. I'm leavin' Johnny an' Bry here, an' ridin' out tonight. I'm goin' on a journey which needs men who know the trails so well they could see them blindfold, but in any case I should want Johnny t'stay around here, an' not ride out long enough t'be seen by any strange rider. Yuh follow?"

"Of course. He mustn't be seen."

"Will he be reas'nable?"

"I don't see why not," said Stella, and her eyes were gleaming with humor. "I suggest yuh put it to Sue to ask him."

Jim grinned. "I'll do that. Fer the rest—yuh're happy here, Stella?"

She eyes him soberly for some seconds, and her large blue eyes were very serious. She looked lovely in the print dress she had borrowed from Sue and which with a few alterations fitted her as though it had been made for her. There was less of a hint of anxiety in her eyes and mouth, and her eyes, if possible, were clearer than when he had first seen her. He remembered the near-tragedy of that morning, but his expression showed nothing of his thoughts.

"But for Johnny's trouble, I would ask for nothing different," she said.

"Thanks. An', Stella—yuh've told us *everythin'?*"

"I've told yuh all I know," she said steadily.

"That's fine," said Jim.

He was relieved, although he hardly knew why, when both Johnny and Bry accepted his instructions without any argument. Johnny promised not to go farther than a mile from the ranch house, and then always with others.

And, soon after nightfall, Jim, the dark-faced and wiry Morton and the three old-timers hit the mountain trail.

* * *

THERE WERE more ways than one of getting to the mountains from the Lazy-K. To anyone not in a hurry, the range trail was the best, since it was easier on the horses, and also on the men. But there was need for haste, and the five rode on the steep and rocky trail which started just behind the great rock which protected the Lazy-K from the wrath of the elements, and also from surprise attacks from the rear.

To reach the top of the mountains it would take all of two days.

Jim did not reckon that there would be any need to go that far. He was convinced that Black had a hideout in the mountains, but reckoned the outlaw would have his camp in a position from which it was fairly easy to approach the range. Where the precious time would go, Jim realized, was in searching for the evidence of the outlaws' presence.

But there the old-timers came in.

Nevada boasted that since he had been a little more than twenty he had known those mountains, and could take a man to any clearing and any place suitable for making a permanent camp. Arizona and Colorado said the same—the former wordily, and with much gesticulation, and Colorado with little more than grunts and signs. Colorado could outmatch an Indian in silent contemplation.

The trail, as they expected, grew difficult after three-four hours' riding, but they did not slacken their pace more than was strictly necessary. There was little growth except stunted trees and shrubs, with occasional small patches of long grass, particularly near the innumerable rivulets which trickled down the mountainside.

They were apparently tireless.

Through the heat of the next morning—they had camped after reaching the rockier trails the precious night for sleep and rest—and the burning fierceness of the afternoon sun, they rode the mountains, sometimes being

forced to make long detours through heavy foliage where the trees and shrubs grew with tropical luxuriance and with rioting color. There were other times when they needed to hack through the tendrils and the undergrowth with the small axes which every man had brought, and as they walked their horses through those hacked parts of the trail they were bathed in a sweat that ran down their faces and soaked their clothes with a humid dampness that seemed as if it would never leave them.

Sometimes, in clearings, they rested, but rarely for long. They came across the spoors of all manner of animals across the trails; it seemed of every living thing except horses and men. And then, toward nightfall, they came to the small landlocked lake which Nevada knew, and as they reached the muddy trail that ran alongside it all five men stiffened.

"Horses, good an' plenty," grunted Nevada Bill.

"Huh," said Colorado.

"That means we've gotten them coyotes tracked!" exclaimed Pete hoarsely.

"It don' mean nuthin' of the kind," said Bill swiftly. "It means they've been along here recently. I guess—"

"If yuh two wouldn't mind obligin'," said Jim with pointed sarcasm, "I'd like it t'be quiet while we listen."

Pete and Bill glared at each other, but in silence. And then through it there came the sound of horses moving, not far away, and with one accord the five turned their broncs and got off-trail, hidden from sight by the overhanging branches of the trees that grew close to the water's edge. As they did so, the first of the riders came in sight.

It was Black.

The man next to him Jim recognized also, with a swift beating of his heart—for it was the swarthy-faced Mexican who had been talking with Howlett, the man Diego. But it was the third man to ride into sight who really worked his excitement to fever pitch.

It was the puffy-faced man who had identified Johnny as the killer of Sorenson!

21

THE five Lazy-K men stood on their feet like wraiths, making no sound. Their horses, trained to the last degree, also kept absolutely motionless, in spite of the proximity of other broncs. The party that had ridden uptrail was not a large one. Black, Diego, the Mid-Texas man and four others. But of those four Jim recognized two as members of the party which had been with Larsen, and calling themselves loggers.

Morton glanced at him meaningly.

Jim nodded and continued to watch the party. If he felt the ironic amusement of the fact that he was no more than thirty yards from them he showed nothing in his expression, which was bleak an uncompromising. His ears were strained to catch any words that were uttered, but Black was the only one of the party who seemed reasonably fresh. The others were red-eyd and disheveled, showing signs of fatigue, if not exhaustion.

Which suggested they had had a long and unaccustomed journey.

Level with Jim, Black turned his head to speak to Diego. As he did so his dark, vicious eyes seemed to look straight at the five riders behind the trees, and all of them were ready in that instant to give battle. But it was an illusion. Black turned his eyes away, and said: "We'll be there in a little time now."

"I should hope so," Diego grunted.

"You don' haff t'complain," said Black, and to Jim it seemed as if the outlaw were amused at some dark joke. "That was the one an' only way've gettin' through without runnin' into Lazy-K men."

Jim stiffened.

"I thought," said Diego in a voice that was filled with venom, "yuh'd arranged t'get us a clear passage over the range."

Black laughed; no further proof of his belief that they were entirely on their own was needed, for the harsh sound brayed over the mountains, and across the lake, sending a swarm of water fowl flying with a sudden flutter of wings that startled the puffy-faced Mid-Texas man into jumping in alarm.

"Sure," said Black, and he still appeared amused. "I 'ranged fer that, Diego, only yuh can't allus be sure've yuhr men. I reckoned we could get over M.M land without trouble, an' I was wrong. An' if we'd come the short way, I guess we would've passed so close to the Lazy-K that we'da been sighted. Would yuh've wanted that?"

"You know that I would not."

"Then what in hell are yuh shootin' yuhr mouth offen yuh fer?" Black became suddenly ill-tempered and aggressive. By then they were well past the hidden party, and yet it was possible to see the exchange of glances between Diego and Black.

There was hatred there.

Slowly the seven men disappeared around the trail from sight. For the first time Jim and his companions stirred. "I reckon," Nevada said, "that Black an' his pard will be fightin' 'fore long."

"That ain't so important as the idee that Black had a clear passage over the M.M," said Pete promptly.

"If yuh think—"

"Damn yuhr eyes," growled Jim *sotto voce*. "If yuh ain't lived long enough t'realize that this is no time fer arguin', it's time yuh had. Colorado an' Nevada will go down-trail, an' find the route, an' the way it reaches the range. They'll ride on from there to the Lazy-K, an' wait fer the rest've us."

"Huh?" said Colorado expressively.

"What're yuh aimin' t'do?" demanded Nevada Bill.

"See what c'n be found at the hideout, an' come back for more men; we've no time t'lose." He nodded and smiled at the others as they forked leather. "I'm relyin' on yuh two fellas t'know that trail back an' front by the time I'm back."

"I guess," said Colorado, expansively for him.

"We'll know it beter'n we know the trail t'Blue Clay," said Nevada. "We'll be seein' yuh."

JIM, Arizona Pete and Morton rode in the wake of the others, but after a lapse of twenty minutes or more. They wanted to take no risks of being seen, for it was essential that they locate the hideout for future operations. In Jim's mind there was the satisfaction of knowing that it was not far ahead, and that the lake, looking somber and shadowy in its strange setting with the mountain summits all about it, made a good landmark.

"D'you know this lake?" Jim asked Arizona.

"Surely, but I ain't been here for a long time."

"That's somethin'. Are there clearin's?"

"There's one, I guess, further up."

"That'll be the one."

They relapsed into silence, and as they drew nearer to the clearing Jim stopped. "Pete, go ahead an' see've yuh c'n see them."

"I'm on my way."

Jim could have carried out that exploration as well as the older man, except that Pete would have in his mind a faint recollection of the clearing which Black probably used. But he had sent Pete ahead more to satisfy the old-timer than for anything else. He waited with Morton, without speaking, and some fifteen minutes passed before Arizona returned. Although he hit the trail only five yards ahead of them they had not heard his approach, and his quiet voice startled them.

"All right, Jim."

Jim turned, and nodded. "Yuh've located them?"

"Sure." Arizona was not jubilant, however, which was not what they expected from him.

"Well?"

The old-timer drew a deep breath, and then pulled at his fleshy underlip. "Jim, I ain't lyin' an' I ain't exaggeratin'; Black's got all've fifty men there."

Jim went rigid, and Morton said softly: *Fifty!*"

"All of fifty," asserted Pete, "an' I went as close as I dared an' counted hosses. Rustlers don' offen have more'n one. I counted more'n six dozen broncs, an' there were cabins where other men could've been sleepin'. It—it ain't a rustlers' outfit," went on Pete with a scowl: "it's a reg'lar army!"

"It's easier to understand why Black could afford t'lose so many men," Jim said quietly. "An' I guess it's easier to understand that we don' take chances this time. I reckon there's one good way we c'n work, however."

"What's that?" asked Pete.

"Watch an' see when Diego an' the Mid-Texas man leave," said Jim. "I'd give a fortune t'hear what they're sayin' to Black."

"Don' yuh go'n do anythin' crazy!" urged Pete.

"No crazier'n I must."

They led their horses along the trail, and when Pete gave the word they went off-trail. There was a small clearing where they could tether the broncs, and they did so.

"One've yuh must stay here," Jim said.

Pete and Morton looked at him appealingly.

"Yuh c'n draw lots," Jim told them.

Pete plucked two stems of grass, folded them in his great paw, with both ends showing, and extended them to Morton. "Longest stays behind," Jim said.

They nodded, and Morton drew one. Pete opened his hand at the same time, and then he swore mildly but with considerable effect.

Morton grinned with satisfaction. "Bad luck, Pete. Yuhr turn will come."

Except for the one outburst of profanity, he took the result with equanimity, however, and watched the otheres as they went slowly out of sight. They had stopped with the horses some two hundred yards from the encampment, and it took them nearly ten minutes of cautious going to approach the place without creating any disturbance.

Pete was clearly right.

They saw that most of the men were sprawled out on the grass of a clearing that must have been some half-mile square. They saw, also, that the horses were dotted about the edges of the clearing in small roped-off corrals, and therefore easy to count. Jim checked Pete's figures; the old-timer had been reasonably near the truth.

They settled down to wait and watch.

FOR SOME time nothing of moment happened, but outside one of the small shacks a Mexican boy squatted on his haunches. He was no more than fifteen or sixteen, thought Jim, and he looked scared and pale in spite of his olive skin. From the shed near where he was sitting came the regular murmur of voices, and there were moments when it seemed as if Black's voice were one of them. There was no chance, however, of distinguishing words.

And then the boy jumped up like a scared rabbit, and went into the shack. After a pause there was a bellow from Black—beyond all doubt that time—and an oath. The boy came running out, and there was an ugly weal across his face. He disappeared behind the shack, and then returned carrying two bottles of what looked like rye. He darted into the shack and was out again in a moment. He stood outside, trembling from head to foot, and looking through the open door.

Then he squatted down on his haunches.

Morton muttered: "I reckon that boy don' love Black none."

"I was thinkin' the same," said Jim

quietly. "I reckon we might use him. Howso-the're drinkin' plenty, an' that suggests they're through with talkin'."

It looked as if he were right.

Silence fell over the encampment, except for the mutter of low-pitched voices from the men themselves, most of whom by then were playing poker or dice. There was no drinking, Jim saw—and he suspected that Black had given orders about that.

The waiting was wearying.

And then, with the shadows of dust falling across the clearing Black and Diego came from the small shack. The puffy-faced Teemer, whose face had grown a fiery red but was less swollen, came after them. All three yawned and stretched their arms before dousing faces and hands in a water-butt. Returning from it, the outlaw leader shot a foot at the Mexican boy, for no reason at all.

Jim's lips tightened when he heard the thud of the kick. "Bring that food, dam yuh!" snarled Black. "What're yuh waitin' fer?"

"The day'll come," said Jim *sotto voce*, "when I'll remind Black've that. I—"

And then he stopped, and Morton half turned, for a voice came from behind them. *"I'm doubtin' that, Kennedy."*

They looked—and they saw Larsen, gun in hand and face twisted in a malevolence that bespoke murder.

22

THE shock was complete; neither Jim nor Morton had the slightest intimation of Larsen's approach. Both men were so surprised that for the first moment they could only stand and stare. Larsen's lips were twisted with a hatred which seemed incredible, for it was held toward men he had seen and known little. But in his red-rimmed and bloodshot eyes there was the glitter of the killer, the deadly rage of a man who took revenge on insult and indignity the only way he knew—through blood.

He looked bigger than he had when Jim had first seen him, and burlier.

"Waal?" he sneered, as neither answered. "Yuh've changed yuhr mind pronto, Kennedy. Yuh're like the rest've them—milk-an'-water when yuh're on a spot. An' yuh're on a hot one now."

Jim said with no apparent effort: "I'm glad t'see yuh, Larsen. I came up t'prove that yuh were with Black, an' it's come my way."

"An' what use will it be t'yuh?" snapped Larsen.

Jim shrugged, and there was even a glimmer of a smile in his steady eyes. "I've never met the time when knowledge wasn't useful, Larsen. Howso—now yuh're here, what d'yuh aim t'do?"

"Turn around," said Larsen sharply.

Jim turned slowly, and even smiled.

"Yuh c'n wipe that grin offen yuhr face," growled Larsen. "Yuhr grinnin' days are over, Kennedy."

Jim said nothing; there was no sense in deliberately making the man lose his temper, and with the gun in Larsen's hand there was no object in trying a quick draw. Even had he succeeded in taking Larsen off his guard, which was unlikely, they were being watched by at least twenty men who had heard the talking and were coming toward the hiding place with their guns out.

Diego and the blistered Teemer watched from the small shack.

Black, after a moment of silent staring, pushed his way through the crowd, shouldering the men aside and swearing at those who stumbled into his path. Jim saw his approach, saw the glitter of hatred in Black's eyes as deep as it had been in Larsen's.

Black said, almost with stupefaction: "Kennedy! Yuh're here!"

"T'me, the mountains have always been free," Jim said.

Black kept staring, and then his lips opened and he grinned. His teeth were yellow and unpleasant to look at, and they made his laugh seem a worse thing even than it was. *"Kennedy!"* he repeated. "The one man I reckoned might cause real trouble! Diego, yuh're through!"

Diego had come forward, and now they had stopped within earshot of Teemer, and the little Mexican boy who was standing near the shack door, with a scared expression on his olive countenance. His eyes were wide with fear, and he was regarding first Black and then the prisoners. "What're yuh sayin'?" Diego's voice was sharp.

"I'm tellin' yuh there won't be more trouble," shouted Black, and he laughed again, holding his belly with his two hands, and rearing his big head backward. "Ho! ho! ho! Kennedy of the Lazy-K comes right int' my hands! Kennedy I'm thankin' yuh!"

"Waal," said Jim and he might have been among friends for all the fear that showed on his face, "I'm not so sure yuh're right t'do that, Black. I've been mighty curious as t'where yuhr hideout was."

"Yuh'll never live t'tell—"

"I've told," Jim said simply.

HE HEARD a gasp from the crowd about him, and he even saw Black off his balance for a moment, and startled. Diego snapped: "What ees that, Kennedy?"

Jim turned toward Diego. "One day mebbe yuh'll learn to understand plain English. I've told Black that I've sent word as t'where his camp c'n be found, an' I guess that's what I meant. Black, you're makin' more mistakes in workin' with Larsen an' Diego. Yuh were never meant t'be anythin' but a two-timin' cow-snatcher, an' when yuh start workin' in numbers yuh go wrong."

Black was so startled he merely gaped.

"I'm glad yuh're agreein'," Jim said mildly.

"Why, yuh—" Black came forward, arm upraised, but Jim dodged the blow by moving his head to one side. His legs and body did not move, and there was all the contempt in the world in his eyes.

"Yuh c'n use yuhr hands all right, Black, when there's forty-fifty others t'help yuh."

Morton made a noise in his throat, probably to suggest that Jim ease off the derision. Diego was watching Jim craftily. Larsen had one hand hooked into his belt, and his face was livid. The other men watched, for the most part expressionless; the only really sympathetic expression was on the face of the boy, who seemed to have forgotten his immediate fears and was looking at Jim as if he worshipped him.

Diego said swiftly: "Black, eet ees time you ask Kennedy what he means when he says that the camp ees known."

"Ah," said Jim. "I was wonderin' when someone was comin' round t'that."

Black growled: "I'll mind my bus'ness, Diego; yuh c'n do's yuh're told. Bring Kennedy an' Morton in here."

For once Black passed the boy without kicking at him; he had thoughts in plenty to keep him occupied. Diego, Larsen, and the Mid-Texas man went after Black, Larsen keeping Jim and Morton in front of him. Their guns had been hooked out of their belts and they were weaponless.

Morton was prepared now to leave the talking to Jim. He stood by, listening and watching, and for all the world it seemed as if he were on a friendly ranch and discussing prospects in the next markets.

Black sat down heavily. "Kennedy, how many know of this outfit?"

"All of the Lazy-K," Jim lied.

"An who else?"

"I can't tell. I sent word three days back; by now I guess the M.M and YB know all about it."

"An' who else?"

Jim said: "Who'd yuh think?"

"Has word gone into Blue Clay?"

"I've no way've tellin'."

Black sat there drumming one big hand on the table, which was dirty and marked with rings where wet glasses had been stood down. The room was a small one, and crowded. Through the only window Jim could see the greater number of the rustlers, mostly on their feet now and interested only in what was happening in the small shack. Certainly those men had been shaken up.

"I suppose," said Diego softly, "that yuh've no way of *makin'* Kennedy tell you *all* he knows, Black."

Black stared. "How could I?"

"There's such a thing as pain," Diego said.

Black's lips curled back, but in that moment he paid Jim Kennedy a compliment better than any that could have been uttered. "Use yuhr head, Diego. Yuh won' make a Kennedy talk thataway, this one less'n any've them."

Larsen swore. "Lemme *try*, Black."

"It's no use, I tell yuh."

THE MID-TEXAS man spoke for the first time, his high-pitched and querulous voice coming unexpectedly. His eyes, more easily visible now that the swelling of his cheeks had lessened, were on Jim. They looked cruel and shifty. "Black, how're yuh sure he's tellin' the truth?"

"Meanin'?" asked Black. It was as if the rustler's leader had found a situation he could not face, and in a measure Jim knew that was true.

"How could he send word down three days back? Yestiddy mornin' he was in Blue Clay."

Black stared. "Is that right, Kennedy?"

"Yuh damned fool," snarled Larsen, "didn't I tell yuh what had happened in Blue Clay?"

Black drew a deep breath. "Kennedy, yuh lyin' coyote—"

Jim snapped: "I don' give a day in hell fer what yuh think an' what the others say, Black. I sent word three days back to the Lazy-K, an' this place has been watched from then on. I followed Larsen an' the others up, I guess."

Larsen roared:

"That's lyin'; I left no trail!"

"Yuh left a trail a boy've ten could've followed," said Jim contemptuously. "Yuh must've dragged one've yuhr logs've wood around with yuh."

Larsen hit him then. The blow was unexpected, for Larsen had to push the Mid-Texas man out of the way. He did so, knocking the man off balance. He struck Jim with a pile-driver blow from a clenched fist that hit him square on the chin, and sent him flying backward. He struck against the rough wooden walls, and then lost his balance. But he was on his feet in a moment. The color had gone from his cheeks, and his lips were pale, but the expression in his eyes was so hard that Larsen seemed to step back as if away from something he could not calculate.

"Yuh'll learn, Larsen," Jim said.

"My frien' Black," said Diego slowly, "we air wasting time, I theenk. Pairhaps Kennedy tells the truth; pairhaps not. You weel let Larsen and me try to make sure, yes?"

"Yuh c'n try," Black said indifferently. "Fer my part I reckon the sooner he's dead the better it'll be. Howso, I'm sendin' guards on all the trails. We c'n leave here in four days, but no earlier. Until then, we'll close all the trails up, an' no one will get into the clearin'." He stood up, pushing his way to the doorway, but he was stopped by the Mid-Texas man.

"Black, I haff t'make my report early—"

"Yuh'n yuhr reprot, Teemer, c'n wait," said Black.

Teemer glared at the rustler's retreating back. Jim and Morton stood expressionlessly, while Larsen poked a forty-five into Jim's ribs, and snapped: "Move, Kennedy; we'll find if yuh're lyin'. An' yuh," he added to Morton, and the two men moved from the shack. Outside Black was

shouting orders, and getting his guards ready. There was a greater activity there than Jim had seen before. It was a long way to dusk, and Black was taking no chances. He had a limited vision, Jim knew, and yet what he did do he would do thoroughly.

Diego said: "Just off the clearin', I suggest, Larsen."

"That's all right with me," Larsen grunted.

JIM GLANCED at Morton. Both men knew what to expect, and the same thought was in each mind—to make an effort to get away, risking death by lead—knowing that it would be preferable to torture. But as if he had read their minds, Larsen acted before the left the clearing. He had a rope coiled about his waist, and he unhitched it, then slung the lasso so that it dropped over them, and pulled tightly. They could not run.

"Eet ees my idea," said Diego in his singsong voice, "to work on Kennedy, Larsen. Eef the other knows anything, he weel talk when he see Kennedy, yes."

"Suits me," said Larsen.

Two or three of the other men had followed the small party, apparently Larsen's men who had come on his unspoken instructions.

There was nothing Jim could do to prevent himself being tied by the waist to the tree, some ten yards off the clearing. Nothing he could do to stop his shirt being torn from him, and cut when the material was obstinate. The cool air played about his chest as he stood upright, his head back, and his hair rustled a little in the light wind.

In front of him Diego and Larsen stood, expectant.

Larsen produced a whip. "Supposin'," he said, "yuh tell the truth, Kennedy?"

Jim said slowly: "I have, Larsen, only yuh wouldn't reckernize it anyway."

The whip slashed out, toward his face.

23

THERE was to be no by-play, and no quarter. Jim had suspected that from the first, and as the end of the whip struck his cheek like a keen-bladed knife, he knew it. He felt the sudden pain, and then he felt the warm blood running down his cheek, to his chin, and down his neck. Except to brace his muscles against the attack, he made no movement, although his eyes closed as the sting came.

Larsen said: "That's a start, Kennedy. I c'n do a lot better'n that."

Jim said nothing.

Diego said: "Such a leetle theeng, Kennedy. Larsen an' me, we know that you tell the lie. Why do you not admit it, *amigo?*"

Jim said: "Yuh'll find out whether it's true, Diego."

The whip slashed out again, slightly higher, and cutting Jim's cheek, just beneath the eye. The blood welled up, making vision in that eye difficult for a moment, and warm blood trickled down, mingling with the other.

"Yuh thought agen?" Larsen said, very softly.

Morton exclaimed: "Jim, doan let them do it!"

The man was sweating as much as Jim. He was fastened by the rope to a tree, but loosely, and he was straining forward. Jim looked toward him, and in his employer's eyes Morton saw the instructions to stick to the story at all costs.

"I guess," said Larsen in a toneless voice, "yuh want t'use that eye've yours agen, Kennedy. Except that yuh won' have much chance, so it doan matter all that much. I wan' laid a man's eye out on his cheek with thisyere whip—this same one."

Morton said in a strangled voice: "Jim, for Gawd's sake, Jim!"

"Keep quiet," said Diego.

The whip curled, and this time Larsen held it above his head, so that the swishing sound was clear to all of them, and so that Jim's eyes turned toward it, as if fascinated by what it meant and what it could do. And then suddenly Morton swore viciously and rushed forward; he had slipped his ropes.

He reached Larsen and the man swung round, changing the direction of the whip. He was a split second too late, for Morton closed on him as the whip caught at his right wrist. Larsen could get no pressure on it, and swore as Morton snatched at his —Larsen's—right-hand gun.

It flashed out.

Jim saw Morton snatch the gun and turn it toward Larsen's chest. He heard the roar of the Colt and saw the flash of flame. Larsen staggered back, an expression on his face more of bewilderment and disbelief than pain.

Larsen slumped down, and Morton swung round, but could not get away because the whip was still tight about his wrist. As Larsen fell, Diego and the others opened fire, but Morton sent bullets snapping out even as lead bit into his own flesh. Two men crashed to the ground, and Diego staggered, hit in the fleshy part of the leg.

Jim saw Morton fall, saw him cut the whip with his bowie, and at the same time snatch at Larsen's other gun, although by then Larsen was dead. Men were rushing up, but they had no idea of how many men they were fighting. They hesitated. Black's voice was roaring instructions, and even Teemer was shouting.

And then a slim figure cut from the clearing toward Jim. It was the boy, and he was carrying a knife. Bullets chased him, but missed. He reached the tree and slashed through the ropes. Jim felt them fall away, and heard the boy's impassioned shout: "Run, *Senor*, run and lose yourself in the woods!" Jim said: "Come on, kid!"

AS HE spoke he saw Morton shudder, and the second gun drop from his man's grasp. He knew that Morton was dead, that no second need be wasted for any purpose. He saw Diego drawing a line on him, but even as he did so Jim snatched the knife from the boy's hand.

The blade struck Diego's hand, pinning it to the ground, forcing the gun away.

But men were crashing through the trees by then, and the shooting grew louder and more intense. Bullets cut through trees within an inch of Jim's face, but did no immediate damage. He was hardly aware of the pain in his cheek, and in his eye. He went on—and then, when he wondered whether there was any chance at all of getting through, he heard shooting from just ahead of him!

The other shooting slackened.

Men who had seen him and suspected that he was unarmed—as was the case—eased back when bullets came their way. One man dropped in his tracks, and then another.

Jim said in a sharp voice: "This way, fella."

He kept a grip on the youngster's wrist, and together they tore their way through the trees and the clinging undergrowth toward the shooting. In less than two minutes Jim saw Pete, not far away, and with three horses near him. "Okay, Pete."

"Get in them saddles!" said Pete hoarsely.

The boy needed no second telling. Both forked leather, and from the pommel bag of his own horse Jim took a spare .45. He was using it, although aiming lead toward men he could not see, when Pete's hammer clicked against an empty drum.

"I reckon there weren't much time t'spare," Pete jerked, and he turned and forked leather like a boy instead of a veteran. "There's a trail this-away, I guess."

"No, *Senor*, no!" the boy shouted, and Pete saw him for the first time. Whatever question was in Pete's mind was not uttered, for Jim snapped: "Lead the way, fella."

The boy urged Morton's horse in a direction different from that which Jim and Pete would have taken, and after five minutes of fairly easy riding it seemed that for the time being they had shaken off pursuit. There were sounds of it behind them, but no one would find trailing them easy in that mixture of trees and bush, undergrowth and bog.

The boy, hot-eyed and aquiver with excitement, said: "This way, *Senor*, thees way ees quick and safe. I, Miguel, found it. Only Miguel knows it."

"I hope yuh're right," Pete growled.

It seemed that Miguel was. Miguel must have learned the route by heart. Through patches that seemed impenetrable he led them, without stopping nor attempting to stop, for more than half an hour. By then all sounds of pursuit had died, but still Miguel went on, until they could hear not far ahead of them the sound of tumbling water.

"Gawdamighty!" gasped Pete. "The falls!"

"Eet ees so," said Miguel still excitedly. "The falls, *Senor*, an' at them we can cross the rivair. Afterwards no one would be able to follow, no one could be sure."

"Who else knows this route?" Jim said.

"None, Senor."

"Is there another way from the camp to the falls?"

"*Quien sabe?* Eef so, *Senor*, Miguel has nevair found it."

Jim nodded, and in a few minutes they came in sight of the falls, which were in the heart of the mountains and normally could only be approached by a rocky trail which had rarely been conquered by man. The falls were almost a legend in Blue Clay. Many people had heard them, and even seen them from a distance; few, if any, had ever gone close to them.

But there they were, a mountainous avalanche of tumbling water, falling with a constant thunder, sending spray hundreds of feet into the air. The spray fell over them even as they neared it, and before they came in sight of the stupendous spectacle of thousands of tons of water falling over the edge of the rocks to the river bed five hundred feet or more below them. It was swirling and foaming, angry and hungry, and it was impossible for man or beast to live in it.

But beneath the falls and the rock down which they fell there was a trail across which they could pass without any trouble or danger. They lost no time, for Miguel led them fearlessly at a moment when it seemed as if he would ride into the falling water, but then disappeared.

Once on that eerie trail, they were in a darkness which was not illuminated until they reached the other side. Occasionally they had to cross small streams, which ran sluggishly. All the time spray fell on them, drenching them to the skin before they had gone fifty yards. But the trail was of solid rock, and there was no danger.

They reached the far side; not until then did Miguel stop by the side of a cluster of dwarf oaks which spread out above them, offering a grateful relief from the burning heat of the sun. The spray fell about them, but served only to make them cool.

Miguel slid from the saddle proudly. "I come here, *Senor*, sometimes when eet ees possible. None has ever followed me here. You are welcome, *Senor*."

"Thank yuh," said Jim gravely. It seemed incredible that the slip of a boy could have led him to safety, but it was so. "I shall always be grateful, Miguel, and will never forget."

"Eet ess nothing, *Senor!* To see you talk to Black, *carramba!* From then, I tell myself I weel help the *senor* if so the good God geeve me the chance. An' he did," said Miguel simply. "When I come here, *Senor*, I pray to the good God for a master kinder than Black. Pairhaps that also comes true, *Senor*."

"It may well," said Jim.

24

THERE had been a period of utter confusion at the hide-out after the first of the shooting. Black had started for the center of the torture, but had stopped when the shooting seemed to quicken, offering greater risk. He had bellowed at his men to get through the ring of trees, but against unknown enemies the attempt had been half-hearted. None there believed that only Morton had been shooting at first, and that afterwards only Jim and Pete, two men in all, had opposed them. The pursuit was as half-hearted as the first counter-attack, for the mountain country was difficult off-trail, and none cared to take the risk of going too fast. A patch of bog-land which trapped a horse and from which the rider scrambled free only just in time had proved a further discouragement. As the sound of the escapers faded from their ears, the outlaws returned in ones and twos. They looked sullen and afraid, guessing that Black would be in a fiendish temper.

They were wrong; Black was standing outside the small shack, staring down at the bodies of Larsen and Morton, both of whom had been brought from the scene of the shooting. Larsen had two wounds in the chest which had bled freely, and Morton had been shot through the chest and stomach. There was a froth of blood at the corners of both men's mouths.

Black grunted suddenly: "Git them away. Cover them with somethin'."

Four men hurried to drag the bodies away for burial, because unburied they would attract coyote and wildcat and possibly other beasts. Teemer, unable to look pale because of his sun-scorched face, was standing quite still by the door of the shack, staring at the outlaw leader. On the ground, sitting against the wall of the shack, was Diego. His lips were set tightly, but he showed no other sign of pain as he looked at Black.

"You and your men," he said clearly, "were mooch afraid, Black. Eet ees not the way to win battles."

Black growled: "Yuh c'n shut yuhr trap. I'm thinkin'." His eyes smouldered as he regarded Diego, whose right hand was an ugly sight; Jim's knife had pierced it from the back to the palm, and Diego had torn it forcibly away.

"I should dislike to pre-vent you from theenking," said Diego suavely, "but perhaps *Senor* Black will be good enough to send Miguel for cloth and water, to bind my hand?"

Black raised his voice. "Miguel, come here, yuh—"

"De kid ran away," said a man who was within earshot. "I seed him—he went into the woods."

Black swore, but mildly, for him. "Yuh c'n get clean cloths an' bind that hand," he said offhandedly, and then he looked at Teemer. "What've yuh got t'say?"

"I—I doan know—"

Black turned with a gesture of impatience. "That's about all yuh c'n say—yuh'n Diego. Yuh give me plenty've talk when there's nuthin' doin', but when things happen yuh're worse'n coyotes. Mebbe yuh realize what's happened. Kennedy knows how t'get here an' c'n raise all've fifty men, mebbe more, if he rides out for M.M and YB riders. He c'n block the trails leadin' here, an' stop us gettin' out. Yuh thought've that?"

"*Sacre Dios!*" exclaimed Diego. "There mus' be ways he knows not of!"

Black laughed. "Yuh don't know the Lazy-K. There's men there that know theseyere mountains better'n anyone in the country. Once we've been located Kennedy c'n handle us as he likes."

"But—but yuh've got more men than fifty!" exclaimed Teemer, and his voice rose almost to a screech, mostly in fear.

Black looked across the clearing

toward the men, who were on their feet and staring toward the small shack. "Mebbe," he said. "These fellas are no-good hombres, all've them. They c'n fight by night an' they'll be good 'nough when they're three-four t'one, but Kennedy's riders would go through them. An' doan argue!" he snapped as Diego started to speak. "Yuh brought me most've them—greasers an' bad whites from Mexico, an' yuh know them as well's me. I'd need all've two hundred to beat Kennedy in an open fight."

Diego tightened his lips, not altogether because his hand was being washed clumsily.

Teemer gasped: "But—but lissen, Black, yuh've got t'do somethin'!"

"Even yuh've thought've that," said Black viciously. "I'm thankin' yuh. We're goin' t'ride out, an' I guess there's one way we c'n beat Kennedy before it gets too late."

"What's that?" demanded Teemer.

"Your great mind has thought a plan?" sneered Diego.

Black looked at him, his eyes smouldering, showing something of the depths of hatred he felt toward Diego. "Sure, I've thought've somethin'. I'm ridin' out, an' I'm raidin' the Lazy-K itself right now. I guess we c'n be in a position to attack afore sun-up tomorrow, if we hurry, an' there's no more'n ten-twelve men at the ranch, I reckon. Kennedy won' have no time t'be back by then."

* * *

BLACK HAD underestimated in one thing at least; he had reports to show him that only ten or twelve men would be left at the Lazy-K, allowing for three besides the dead Morton with Jim Kennedy. His men, however, had not known that there were outriders of the Lazy-K within a short distance of the ranch-house, so that when the attack developed fully twenty men, warned by Nevada Bill, were behind the strong barricades of the ranch.

Outside, Johnny Digby said to Bry: "Yuh fellas doan reckon yuh c'n lose, do yuh?"

Bry, rifle in hand and eyes gleaming, grinned. "The Lazy-K doan lose out, Johnny. Yuh'll see!"

"How'll they come?"

"Straight for us, mostly. I'm hopin' they doan', seein' that if they split up their forces they'll be easier meat, but I reckon Black knows thisyere outfit well enough t'reelize which is the best way fer him to work."

Johnny, standing on the veranda, and also with a Winchester ready for action, nodded and started out toward the range, and the trees that dotted it near where they were standing. The trees would give Black's men some kind of cover until they were within a hundred yards of the ranch-house. But for that hundred yards the trees that had been there had been cut down tens of years before, in order that there should be no way in which attackers could come through and approach almost unseen.

Black's men could be heard but not seen.

"Most've a quarter-mile off," Bry said. "I'm goin' up on the roof. There's room fer yuh."

Johnny grinned and followed.

There was no trouble getting to the top, for a ladder had been placed in positon. When they reached the sloping, tarred roof, they found that two other men were also in position there. The advantage, of course, was that they could fire down.

"There's two-three," Bry snapped.

The punchers, both old-timers, let him start the shooting. But it was not until Graham Kennedy had called for the men to shoot any they saw that Bry let the lead fly.

Johnny followed suit.

The attackers were bad targets, for they could only be seen through the trees. But the harassing value of the shooting was considerable.

The thunder of hoofs stopped. "Black's wonderin'," said Bry slowly. "That yeller-bellied coyote doan like punishment, an' his men are as bad."

"Hold yuhr fire," called Graham.

The men obeyed, and for some minutes there was silence. Then Graham gave the order for occasional shooting, but it was clear that he

proposed to try to convince Black that they were less strong than they were.

Bry called down: "All've twenty men have passed, Pa."

"Yuh know what t'do," said Graham.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a bellowing from the trees, and the sudden stampede of riders. They burst into sight, thirty of them if there was one, Black at their head.

"They doan like it," grunted Bry. "Black wouldn't lead them if they'd come on their own. Let 'em have it, Johnny!"

The four of them on the roof fired as swiftly as their repeaters would allow. They saw three or four fall, rolling clear of the horses They heard a horse, badly wounded, squeal with the pain, and they saw it rolling on its back and kicking in frenzy. None of the advancing rustlers wasted time to put it out of its misery. They came on at a gallop, firing from sixguns as they did so. There was to be no slackening unless their losses forced them back.

Black crouched high on the neck of his bronc, hiding as much of himself as possible. Twice Johnny fired at him, missing each time. The gap between the attackers and the defenders was lessening rapidly.

TWO HUNDRED yards.

One hundred.

Johnny's face was damp with sweat, and his eyes were narrowed and watering a little because of the pungent cordite smoke that stung them and his nostrils and his mouth. He was hardly aware of it. however, and his vision was as clear as if nothing were in its way.

Fifty yards!

There was a regular fusillade from the attackers, who were firing two-handed, and aiming to force the defenders to slacken fire for the final rush at the stockade. And the grim purposefulness of the attack was such that it looked as if it must succeed in a measure. Black himself was no more than thirty yards away, his great black horse straining forward, teeth bared.

"If I doan get that coyote I'll lay me down." He took careful aim, lying on his stomach now, but a chance bullet struck the roof not two inches away from him, and bounced over his arm. His aim was spoiled, and Black came on, his heavy face taut with venom and hatred.

There were twenty men in line with him.

Behind him the grass was littered with the bodies of men and horses, some squealing, some swearing, some moaning in pain. All the time the roaring of the .45's was like bedlam, guns which were being used both ways. There seemed no end to the din nor to the attack—it looked as if the defenders could not drive them back.

Ten yards away.

The Lazy-K men had flung caution to the winds now, and were standing in full sight the better to watch and get their men. The fire was ceaseless, a withering volley of lead which had death in every piece of it. Three-four men crashed as they put their horses to the barricade. A beast was hit in midair, and collapsed on the barbed wire, screaming as it kicked and struggled and tore itself. Black himself was almost at the barricade.

Two rustlers got through!

Bry was tight-lipped by then, and it was small wonder. The battle had not been all one-sided. At least five of the Lazy-K men were stretched out, while several others were crawling toward the ranch-house to have their wounds tended. There were some already being bathed, or having the lead cut from their flesh.

Black came over!

"I guess we're in a spot," Bry said. "If there's any more've the coyotes, they'll get through."

"But—" said Johnny, and he was about to ask why Bry should think there were others.

Then Johnny saw what Bry had meant.

Another line of attackers was coming, nor firing, but putting all the speed they knew into their effort.

They came at a tremendous speed, and the very ground shook. There were twenty of them, Johnny reckoned, and he used the Winchester again, picking two men off but doing nothing to slacken the approach.

Only Bry and himself on the roof were in action.

One man was dead, the other was so badly wounded that he could do nothing. But although he was in severe pain there was a grin on his lips as he watched Bry and Johnny shooting until their Winchesters grew so hot it was almost impossible to hold them.

"Six-guns," Bry muttered.

Johnny nodded, dry-lipped.

There were at least ten of Black's men inside the defenses, and most of the defenders were forced into a position where they could do little. The second line of attackers had come so close that in a moment they would be leaping the barricade.

"We goin' down?" Johnny muttered.

"Nope—do more harm here, I guess."

"I'm followin'."

That was all they said.

THEY WERE stretched out flat on their stomachs and firing as fast as they could. But the box of ammunition from which they replenished their guns was getting dangerously low. Shooting was still fierce from below, and most of the defenders had gathered about the veranda of the ranch house, determined to make sure that the women were safe as long as possible.

Downstairs was bedlam and confusion.

The attempt to make the big room into a hospital was a failure now, although the three women worked until sweat poured down their faces to patch up wounded men so that they could go back to their posts. The windows, blocked up while waiting for the attack to start, were used as firing-stations, and rifles and six-guns poked through them. Black was still in his safe position, issuing orders which could just be heard above the din. Lead plucked at the boards, at the windows, into the log sides of the house itself. What glass there had been was smashed beyond recognition.

Stella went through into Danny's room. He was pale-faced but his eyes were shining and he was unhurt. The white coverlet of his bed was stained with oil and black smoke, and he was thoroughly dishevelled. But there was excitement in him, and nothing to admit defeat.

"'Lo, Stella," he said.

"'Lo, Dan."

"It's been mighty hot work," Dan said, and he relaxed for a moment, resting his gun on the bed beside him. To Stella it seemed as if she had never seen a sight like it. A man lying in bed and bolstered up with pillows so that he could see through a crack in the boarded windows, fighting as if he were fully fit, and appearing to enjoy it.

"It has," Stella said. For some reason she could not properly understand, she found words difficult to come by. There was a silence, then, except for occasional orders which Black was calling outside. Dan grinned, but he, too seemed awkward. "Stella— yuh've been mighty good t'me since I've been sick."

"That's nothing."

"It's more than yuh ree-lize. Stella —need yuh stay out there now?"

"Not for all of the time."

Their eyes met, and to each it seemed as if the other wanted to say something, but would not. And then, quite coolly and unconcernedly, Stella sat on the edge of the bed and covered his hot hand with her own cool one. "We'll have plenty to talk about afterwards, Dan."

And Dan Kennedy's eyes lighted up, while for a moment there was complete silence. Then Black's voice broke it. He was not giving orders to his men, for his first words were: "Kennedy—c'n yuh hear me?"

There was a pause, and then Graham Kennedy's voice replied, surprisingly strong and carrying.

"Ther's nuthin' I want t'hear from yuh, Black."

"Yuh're wrong," called Black, and there was a gloating triumph in his voice, clear enough and ample evidence that he considered the battle was over as far as he was concerned. "Yuh'll surrender now, Kennedy, or —"

He paused, and no one answered. There was rage in his voice when he went on, because Graham had not risen to his bait.

"Or this, Kennedy! I'll burn yuhr place over yuhr head, an' as all've yuh come runnin' out like rats I'll shoot yuh down.. All've yuh—exceptin' the women."

Dan's hand suddenly gripped Stella's, while in the larger room Sue looked sharply at her mother.

"Exceptin' the women," Black called again, and then he laughed, a vicious, repellent sound. "There's not enough t'go round, but I'll manage. Yuh've got ten minutes t'make up yuhr mind. The flares are ready t'start when I give the say-so. Open up them doors an' I'll let all've yuh go free."

But even as he spoke they knew that he was lying.

25

ON THE roof, Johnny and Bry could hear every word, and more — they could see the expression on Black's face, and they knew the utter viciousness of which the man was capable. Johnny's face was pale, and Bry's teeth clicked against each other.

Johnny said in an undertone: "What chance've we got of ridin' out?"

"More-less none," said Bry cheeressly. "An' if we made a break for it an' got away, I guess it'd be too long before we could reach Blue Clay, an' help. I—Johnny! Look there!"

On the height that they were they could see for miles around, and as Johnny stared in the direction of Bry's pointing finger, he saw the party of riders just coming over the nearest ridge of hills, some eight miles away. But for the clearness of the air it would have been impossible to see them, but the sun showed them clearly. There were eight or nine in all.

Johnny said: "We've got t'get word t'them that Black's in possession. If we doan, Black'll be able t'take them by surprise."

"There's one way," Bry said, and he no longer sounded cheerless. "Down the other side've the ranch-house, an' then across to the corral. I guess with luck we'll make it. There's none've the bunk-house facin' that way, an' Black's men are keepin' under cover. We're more likely t'be hit by our fellas, but we'll have to take that chance. Yuh ready?"

"I'm there."

Both of them were filled with a tense excitement at the chance that had come their way. It was hope when hope had seemed lost, and neither of them hesitated for a moment to take the risk that the sortie meant. They clambered over the roof as softly as they could, crawling most of the time on their stomachs. From the eaves to the ground was a drop of some ten feet, not far for lithe youngsters. They went over together, taking a chance that they would not be seen, and for a moment they were hanging suspended from the eaves.

They dropped.

Both of them took the jump easily, and without damage, but as they started for the corral they were seen. Three shots rang out from Black's men, but they were not hit. Johnny reached the corral first, leaping over the stockade that ran around it. There were no more than ten horses inside. He leapt for the first, heedless of saddle, and as he landed safely he started the beast into motion.

Bry had the same luck at first.

But as he leapt, three-four of Black's men came riding from outside the corral, heading him off from Johnny. He was forced to ride in the other direction, low in the saddle,

ducking and swaying to avoid the lead that came swinging toward him. He was not hit, but he knew that he could never reach the riders.
Johnny might.

Barebacked though he was, Johnny was riding like the wind, not troubling to swerve or sway, but aiming to cover the distance as fast as he could. Lead hummed about him, but did him no damage. He kneed his bronc, urging it all the time to go faster.

Faster—faster!

He knew that if he got word to the newcomers they would be able to force Black to withdraw, for they would put Black between two fires, and the rustler would not take that chance. *If* he reached them—

Three-four outlaws were stringing behind him, firing as they came. But by then the men ahead had heard the shooting, and were riding faster. Johnny was aware that the lead about him had stopped and he glanced over his shoulder to see that the rustlers were riding back.

He grinned slowly, but did not slacken pace.

But as he approached the party of riders the grin disappeared. Still he kept on, without reducing his speed, but the light had gone from his eyes, and the buoyancy from his heart. For he saw the sun glinting on the star on the chest of one of the newcomers, and he recognized Howlett.

The only way he could give full warning was to surrender himself to the sheriff.

* * *

BRY RODE like the wind; he heard the shooting behind him, but when he looked over his shoulder he saw that it was coming from Winchesters and that the pursuit of him had stopped. Clearly, Black's men had aimed at stopping him from taking word to the newcomers, and they had succeeded. He slackened speed, seeing Johnny and the other party getting closer.

And then he stared ahead of him, scarcely crediting his eyes.

Coming down the mountain trail were three riders. He recognized Jim in a flash, and Pete. The little Mexican boy was a stranger.

He swung his bronc, and rode fast toward Jim, and as the small party saw him they too hurried.

Jim drew ahead of the others, and Bry shouted: "Head the ranch-way, Jim! Head that-away! Black's attacked!"

Jim Kennedy's face changed color.

He did not lose time, but swung round so that from their different positions the two brothers were riding toward the ranch, but getting closer to each other with every step. Pete and Miguel followed Jim, although so far without knowing what had happened.

Jim drew close enough to call: Any damage?"

"So far, plenty. Johnny's ridden toward a party comin' from Blue Clay. Pa an' the others are inside the ranch-house. Black broke through with most've forty men."

Jim said: "Yuh follow, I'm ridin'."

It seemed incredible that he could make the speed that he did, but he seemed to leave Bry standing. Pete and Miguel reached the younger Kennedy, and they rode at top speed, but were still out-distanced. By then Jim could see the party from Blue Clay, riding fast toward the ranch.

Shooting started.

He had only a six-gun with him, and no spare ammunition, but for once it seemed as if he would not need to worry about that. As the shooting began, men rode from the ranch toward the mountain trail, but away from Jim and the others. Black was among them, and was riding like the wind. He had one thought only now—to escape.

Jim's lips tightened.

He saw Black riding almost blind, and knew that the leader of the outlaws would outdistance his men. And he knew, also, that there might never be a better chance of catching Black. He altered his direction then, heading for Black!

Bry and Pete saw what he was aiming to do.

With one accord they opened fire on the rustlers in Black's wake. The

men were startled at the sudden opposition, and immediately changed their course. Deliberately Bry and Pete had not fired close to Black, and he rode on without knowing where the shooting was going, and worrying less as it was not toward him.

Jim thundered toward him.

They were riding toward the same point, the trail head, and most of half a mile separated them, with Jim a little farther from the trail than Black. He gritted his teeth, cursing the fact that the gray was not beneath him. On Gray he would have made that run without the slightest trouble. Now there was doubt.

He made no more sound than he had to.

Black was intent on his ride, and looking only ahead of him. There was no reason he should suspect that the thundering hoofs he could hear were from his enemies. The gap between him and the mountain trail lessened, but between him and Jim there was no more than a hundred yards.

Eighty.

Sixty.

And then Jim opened fire.

For the first time he realized that his shortage of ammunition might be fatal, but it did nothing to stop him, or to make him slacken his pace. His first bullet went close enough to make Black turn his head in the saddle, and then for the first time the rustler saw who it was.

He flashed his gun from its holster.

JIM FIRED again, but the speed at which they were moving made accuracy impossible, and he missed. Black's bullets went wide, but the gap between them was closing. There was no longer any chance of Black reaching the trail, and thus safety in the rocky mountains, before Jim Kennedy.

They had to shoot this out.

Black thundered on, firing sideways. Jim held his fire, knowing he had no more than two bullets left Nearer and nearer, swaying in the saddle as Black fired seeing the way the rustler's lips turned back over his teeth, seeing the glitter in the man's dark eyes, the slobber that ran down his chin, glistening on his black stubble.

Twenty yards.

Jim fired, then and as he was approaching his man his target was the easier. He saw Black flinch as the bullet took him in the shoulder, but as he saw it the horse beneath him stumbled!

There was no chance of escaping a fall.

Jim knew it, and went out of the saddle, over the brute's head and thudding toward the ground. He tried to keep his grip on the six-gun, but it was impossible, and the gun was jerked from his grasp. He turned over and over, while bullets spat out at him, missing him by inches. Black had pulled up his bronc savagely, seeing Jim at his mercy.

And then Black's hammer fell on an empty barrel!

Jim had steadied, breathing deeply, able to get to his feet when he liked, for he had lessened the effect of the fall with his shoulder. He heard nothing and he stood up. He saw Black riding down on him the gun raised as a club, and he knew what had happened, that Black was out of ammunition.

He jumped *forward!*

He might have been expected to jump away, to try to get out of the reach of the gun, but he did nothing of the kind. He saw Black drawing closer every split-second, the savage face berserk with rage, the eyes glittering. He knew that if he dodged he would be attacked again and he leapt toward Black, so that the shattering blow hit only the air behind him.

He gripped Black's waist.

There was no chance for the outlaw to save himself. With the weight of Jim behind him there was nothing he could do to stop himself from crashing from the saddle. They hit the ground together, with Black uppermost, but Jim twisted around, and his hands changed their grip. They fastened about Black's neck as the

rustler brought his knee toward Jim's groin. Black gasped as the stranglehold tightened, and Jim increased the pressure.

There was no mercy in him.

He felt Black's struggles slackening, saw the huge eyes popping from their sockets. Black's mouth was open, and his tongue protruded, ugly, obscene. But he still struggled, ugly, til suddenly he coughed, and then lay still.

Jim released him then.

26

THE RUSTLERS' collapse was complete. Men were streaming toward the trail-head, with Howlett's men and a few Lazy-K riders in pursuit, but most of them were miles away. Nevertheless, the rustlers rode as if they were on their heels, and they spared no time for looking across at Jim and Black. If they did glance up and recognize their leader, they paid no heed.

Had Jim's gun been loaded he could have finished more than one of them.

As it was, Pete, Bry and Miguel kept firing from a little copse of trees behind which they had taken cover. The rustlers, coming at full pelt and looking neither to right nor left, went down one after the other —one man falling from every two who got past. And the total number of the attackers who reached the trees was no more than thirty.

"An' twenty've them got away," Bry said with deep dissatisfaction. "If I'd had my way every one've the coyotes would have bitten more've the dust then they needed t'choke them."

"Yuh're too bloodthirsty," Pete said, looking at the stretched bodies. "I guess enough've them varmints is dead or dyin' t'make Blue Clay free've rustlin' fer a long time t'come. They tried big, an' they lost big. Howso, they've finished runnin', an' it's time we reach Jim. Hebbe he needs help."

Jim needed little help, as it turned out.

He had caught Black's bronc, and was waiting to see whether the outlaw would come round. He was not dead, for his pulse was beating, and even his chest moved as he sucked the breath into his lungs. Pete and Bry reached the couple as Black's eyes opened for the first time.

"That's dandy," said Jim. "Yank him up in his saddle, yuh two. An' we'll ride."

They were at the Lazy-K in tenfiteen minutes, met some way out by Howlett and Colorado, who had got through unscathed. So was Nevada free from injury, although no more than six of the Lazy-K men could claim that. Graham Kennedy had a slight wound in the right forearm, but no worse.

Howlett's white face was expressionless as Jim reached him. "Well, Kennedy. Yuh've got Black, then."

Black, tied to his saddle and still only half conscious, nodded his head as if in agreement, although the movement was involuntary, for he could not have heard what was said. Howlet did not look away from Jim, who nodded.

"So yuh see. An' yuh'll want t'talk, I guess."

Howlet searched his face, and his lips tightened at the sight of the whip-cuts on his right cheek. The bandage had come off early that morning, but the wound had not reopened. It was ugly, and the eye was not only puffy but badly discolored. The whole of the right side of his face was badly swollen.

"Talk c'n wait," Howlett said "I guess I c'n stay in the Lazy-K if needs be two-three days. I'll send word back to Blue Clay about what's happened."

"I'm thankin' yuh," Jim said.

It was not until then, in fact, that he realized how exhausted he was. He had ridden hard for the past two days, and although the others had

kept at the pace which he had set, they had not lost the amount of blood that he had, nor did they suffer from the same pain.

He was surprised when he awakened, for the sun was streaming through the window of the room which he had shared with Bry. Bry had come to bed long after Jim, but nevertheless was up and about.

Jim lay for some minutes in a pleasantly drowsy state, but his body was stiff, and his cheek was painful. He stirred himself, and went outside for a wash. It was not easy to avoid reopening the cuts, but he contrived it. He was halfway back to the ranchhouse when he heard Dan's voice.

"Stella—it doan seem possible."

"I'm quite sure," Stella said, and Jim stood very still.

"When I first saw yuh I reckoned I was knocked right over, said Dan.

"An then I ree-lized that Bry was too. An' I reckoned yuh wouldn't be int'rested in any've us, unless it was Jim. Stella—Jim's a mighty fine man."

And Stella laughed, although there was a note of softness in the laugh, and in her voice afterwards.

"I don't need telling about Jim," she said. "But—well, Dan, it's early days yet. Yuh might change yuhr mind."

"No fear've that!" exclaimed Dan fervently. "I guess I'll have t'take a time t'get used to the idee, though. Stella—"

His voice deepened, and Stella's shadow crossed the wall of the room, which Jim could see clearly. He saw her head move downwards and Dan's upwards. And then he walked swiftly past, his left cheek and the left side of his mouth twisted wryly, and the expression in his eyes inscrutable.

* * *

HOWLETT LOOKED at Jim Kennedy, at Graham and at Johnny Digby. His big white face with the drooping mustaches was devoid of expression, and his voice too was monotonous, but there was nothing about him to suggest the hostility that he had shown earlier.

"Lissen," he said, after Jim had finished speaking. "I'm not arguin' about the fact that Sorenson might've been worth killin'. Black was worth killin', but yuh kept him fer the law."

Johnny said slowly: "The law would only have worked for Sorenson."

"Mebbe he committed no crime agenst it. I've nuthin' agenst yuh, Digby, but I'm goin' t'see yuh handed over to the officers at Austin. I've had word by cable that they're sending men out fer yuh. I'm glad," he added quietly, "that yuh had yuhr way, Kennedy, an' he wasn't allowed t'go on to Austin. Also, I'm forgettin' the fact that yuh an' yuhr friends held up the posse an' freed Digby."

Jim said: "That's never been admitted, an' won't be. Howso, yuh could have tried t'prove it, an' I'm glad yuh're savin' us that trouble." He looked at Johnny. "There's nuthin' t'be done, Johnny. If I had my way there would be."

Johnny said: "I'll face what comes, Jim. Yuh'll look after Stella, I know. But—I wish I c'd be sure that there'd be a fair trial."

"Yuh admit yuh killed him," said Howlett.

Johnny's lips creased in a smile, and the admiration of Jim and Graham Kennedy for the youngster increased. A man who could smile in his predicament had all he needed.

"Surely yuh're dreamin', Sheriff. I've admitted nuthin'. I've obeyed my friend an' lawyer right from the start. I've said that the law would work for Sorenson, but that admits nuthin'. Howso—" He shrugged and smiled. "It's time I talked, Jim."

Jim said; "Commit yourself to nuthin', but don' be afraid that Howlett will twist what yuh do say."

Johnny nodded. "Right! I visited Sorenson, an' he was not alone at the hotel. The man Wilson, who was an agent who worked sometimes with my father, was there. So were two-three others. There were hot words. Sorenson tried to blacken my father's name. He went for his gun, reckonin' I wouldn't draw mine with so many about. I'm quick on the gun fer a townsman," Johnny added, "an' I saw red. I pumped all the lead I had into

that swine's chest, I reckon, though I fired blind, an' I'm not regrettin' it. But—*he drew first.*"

Howlett flashed: "If that's so, yuh've a good defense. Why run away from it?"

Johnny's lips twisted. "With only Sorenson's men to witness it, what chance would I have had?"

"None," Jim said. "Yuhr runing away was understandable, Johnny. Apart from Wilson an' Sorenson, c'n yuh remember any've the names of the people in the hotel when yuh fired?"

Johnny said: "I didn't know them well, but there was a Mex I heard called once. The name 'Diego' was used."

"*Diego!*" exclaimed Jim.

"It—it ain't possible it's the same man!" snapped Howlett.

And both of them stared at Johnny Digby, who returned their gaze but was clearly puzzled and unable to understand.

IT WAS the following day that a small party left the Lazy-K for Blue Clay. Johnny was in it riding free. Howlett and three members of his posse were also included— the bulk of the posse had already returned. Jim Kennedy was there. but no one else of the family, although Nevada and Arizona rode with him.

There had been plenty of talk. and Howlett had cleared up some things. Diego had been sent from Austin by the state authorities, to inquire into the activities of rustlers. The fat man Jim had seen had also been from Austin, and had been one of sufficient authority to be able to give Howlett orders. None of the orders had been against the law. The man—named Conroy—had told Howlett to get Digby at all costs, since Digby was reckoned to have murdered one of the most influential citizens in Austin.

"He wouldn't know that Diego was runnin' with Black," Howlett asserted. "He kept out've the limelight fer the reason he wanted no one to know he was in the district. Had he been recognized there would have been talk that Mid-Texas wanted t'buy up Blue Clay outfits. It wasn't the case."

Jim said dryly: "That's mebbe. I'd like t'see this Conroy."

"He's due t'see me this afternoon," said Howlett, and his expression was bewildered. "Diego should be with him, I guess, but now yuh've seen him I reckon Diego won' turn up."

"That's most likely," Jim said.

They did little talking on the last stretch of the ride, which they had taken easily and which ran them into Blue Clay two hours after the sun was at its highest point. There were cries of welcome from the townsfolk, and Jim grinned. There was no outburst against Johnny Digby such as might have been expected.

Howlett said: "We'll go straight t'my office."

"Sure," said Jim. He glanced at Johnny, whose smile was somewhat drawn, but who said nothing.

They tied their horses to the rail, and then stepped from the sidewalk into the outer office. Nat Heep looked up with a scowl, saw who it was and jumped immediately to his feet, sticking his feather pen behind his ear. He blinked as fast as he talked, and he talked quickly.

"Howdy, Sheriff, howdy! Glad t'have yuh back! Yuh've got yuhrself visitors, yessir." He stopped and looked uncertainly at Jim, and then Johnny. Seeing the latter, his mouth dropped open. "Yuh—you've got *Digby* back?"

Howlett ignored him except to say: "Has Mr. Conroy arrived?"

"Sure, sure," said Heep, standing on one foot and then on the other. "He's in there, Sheriff."

Howlett nodded and went through into the smaller office. Jim and Johnny followed. They saw three hats rising upward as the waiting men stood up, and then Jim saw who was there.

Conroy—the fat man.

Diego—and Teemer!

There was a moment's tense silence as the trio entered. Jim saw Diego's bandaged right hand, and knew the reason for it. Teemer's face had thinned down a lot but the skin was

peeling badly. Conroy, fat and florid, stared uncomprehendingly while Diego's left hand was very steady with a six-gun poking toward the three by the door.

"You can come in, but keep your hands in sight," Diego said very softly. "Thees ees a surprise, Kennedy. I was told that you wair dead. That ees not quite true, Senor."

27

HOWLETT kept quite still. Jim Kennedy followed his example, and only Johnny Digby moved, a little toward the door so that he was a yard away from the other two. He kept his hands hooked in his belt, not far from his guns. Howlett and Jim were farther away from their own guns.

Diego said: "And you, Deegby."

"I'm waitin' fer yuh t'shoot," said Johnny Digby. "Because the moment yuh shoot my way Kennedy will have his irons out, an' there won' be all that left've yuh." He grinned into Diego's face and the Mexican went pale with anger; the insolent smile left his lips. "Glad t'see yuh again," he added. "Diego, who was a witness to Sorenson shootin' first—"

"Eet ees a lie," Diego snapped.

"Yuh reckon so?" asked Johnny. "I guess if yuh say so it ain't no use me tryin' to persuade others others dif'rently. They'll always be ready t'believe a greaser instead of a white man, I guess."

"Johnny, keep quiet!" ordered Jim.

"That's sense," said Howlett slowly. "Diego, put that gun away. Yuh're crazy t'show it. Yuh forget that thisyere township is full've men who would be after yuh in less time than it takes t'count ten."

Diego sneered: "That would be too little time for them, Howlett. Outside a fast horse is waiting for me. In a short while I should be in the hills, and afterwards over the border in my own country. I did not come here without making all the preparations needed, you can believe that."

Jim said: "Why did yuh come?"

Diego's eyes flashed toward him. "Always, Kennedy, you weesh to know *why*. Eet ees a bad habit, and one that leads you into too moch danger, yes? But for once I weel satisfy your curiosity, *amigo*. I came to kill Digby."

Johnny's eyes narrowed.

"Yuh've only half finished," Jim drawled. "Agen—*why?*"

"That," said Diego, "is where I do not propose to speak, *Senor* Kennedy." The mockery in his voice and his expression increased, but he did not relax his grip on the gun. "But I weel tll you some theengs, Kennedy. The Mid-Texas Cattle Corporation wished to buy *all* of the range and cattle in the country, Eet was known that the YB and M.M. would sell to a large enough figure, but you would not. You begin to ondairstand, yes?"

"I've understood that for a long time," Jim said. Diego stared, and flashed: "You lie, Kennedy!"

"Oh, no," Jim said. "There were pieces that needed fittin' into the right place, but t'me that seemed obvious. Someone wanted the whole of the country. The YB and M.M. were not doing so well they would refuse to sell out. Rustling took place, it was said, from both of them. I checked the places where it was supposed to have happened, *an' I found it was a lie!"*

Howlett said sharply. "Why'n't yuh tell me of this?"

"Because from the time I saw yuh with Diego an' Conroy I reckoned you were in it as much's them. I'd worked out that there could be only one reason for the big effort to get Digby, dead or alive. To prevent him from identifying the Mid-Texas representatives in this country. That's so, Conroy, isn't it?"

Conroy said in a harsh voice: "Digby murdered one've the biggest shareholders of the corporation. He must pay the penalty for that."

"When it's proved, yes. Before it, no."

"Teemer and Diego saw it—"

Jim flashed: "Two damned liars

who've worked for Mid-Texas so long they're as crooked an' rotten as the comp'ny itself! Yuh know that as well's I do. Diego's word ain't worth a rattlesnake's skin, an' Teemer is lower'n a desert rat. Johnny, these two and who else were in that room when Sorenson died?"

Johnny said: "One other man. He was not known t'me."

JIM FLASHED again: "Maybe he was unknown, but he traveled from Austin to try to find yuh—just why I can't tell, but one reason is enough. He came with a letter for you in his wallet, one that had reached the Lessing Hotel after yuh left. He was mighty anxious t'consult yuh. Mebbe he reckoned he could get money out of tellin' what really happened when Sorenson drew on yuh. Yuh've said that yuh lost yuhr temper an' fired bling. Waal, *yuh missed.* Diego shot Sorenson, the way he would shoot you now if—"

Diego swore: "*Sacre Dios,* you—"

And then Jim drew. Nothing faster had been seen in Blue Clay, but against a man who was holding his gun it seemed suicide. Jim calculated on one thing to give him hope—the fact that Diego was left-handed because of the wound in his right hand. Drawing, he moved swiftly to one side.

Two shots rang out, fast upon each other.

Diego's gun dropped from his fingers, for the bullet had caught him in the shoulder. Johnny and Howlett flashed their guns out, while Jim winced, and then leaned heavily against the wall.

Johnny exclaimed: "Jim, yuh're hit!"

Jim said easily: "Not bad, Johnny. A touch in the thigh, I guess." He sat down slowly when Johnny brought a chair, and blood showed on his trousers, halfway down the thigh. But he showed no sign of the pain that it must have been causing. He stared at Diego with his lips twisted wryly. Diego was standing, with both

(Continued On Page 92)

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(Continued From Page 91)

arms useless, and two guns trained on him.

Jim said: "Yuh shot Sorenson, Diego. Yuh reckoned that all of the men who saw yuh would lie with yuh, but yuh made one mistake. One man thought there was more money t'be made out of Digby, an' trailed him, carryin' that letter. It was known he was going to tell the truth, an' he was shot when Black's men tracked him, an' he died on the mesa."

"It ees a lie!" Diego said, but he was breathing heavily.

"No," said Jim. "It's no lie, an' I c'n prove it. Black's admitted killin' that man; Black's a prisoner, an' he's talked. He didn't know everythin', but he knew that. He made one mistake about the killin', Diego. He forgot to take the papers that the man had in his belt. The papers, including a letter to Johnny Digby, were found by the men and handed to me." Jim moved his right hand toward his shirt pocket, unbuttoned it, and drew out the papers and envelope found in the murdered man's belt. He held them to Howlett, and said:

"Read that scrawl on the back've the envelope aloud, Howlett."

Howlett glanced at it, and his lips tightened. But he read in a level voice: *"Diego—killed—Sorenson. I knocked—Digby's hand up—to stop—the lead. I swear this to be the truth—as sure as I am—a dying man."*

Diego screeched. "Eet ees a lie, I—"

"It's true," said Jim. "I had these papers handed to the lawyer in this township the day they were found, an' I got them back after they had examined and testified. They had instituted inquiries in Austin. *Someone else was in that room, unknown t'yuh!"*

Diego stared, speechless. For a moment it looked as if he would shout again that the story was a lie, but suddenly he sat down and said in a level voice: "Eet ees true. Deegby's hand was knocked aside. My bullets killed Sorenson."

CONROY snapped: "Diego, what are yuh saying? I—"

"You had promise to get me free," Diego said, "but I think Kennedy can get at the truth the long way round by trying, and he weel try hard. Shereef, I weel make a statement. I admit to killing Sorenson. I did it because Sorenson was quarreling weeth Conroy and other directors of the corporation. He believed that the illegal operations of the companee had gone far enough. Conroy and othairs disagreed. Conroy had plans then to get this part of the country. Sorenson said no, and could have stopped it while alive. We planned to keel him, with Deegby as the supposed murderer."

Conroy gasped in a strangled voice: "This is nonsense, Howlett! Ignore it!"

"Go on," Howlett said gruffly.

Diego's lips widened in a smile to show his flashing teeth.

"You see, Conroy, you air not believed! Listen well, Howlett. When Deegby escaped eet was necessary to keel him, since he came thees way. Eef he joined any of the outfits, he could tell what he knew, undair pressure. Conroy was in the district. He wanted to be kept hidden until aftair Deegby was gone. He arranged with Abb and Guess of the YB to sell out —Dexter would be persuaded by his foremen. He negotiated with Marsh of the M.M. Marsh was obstinate, and—"

Jim said: "He then went to Corny West, Marsh's foremen, and West agreed to help for a consideration. That's so?"

Diego gasped: "*Sacre Dios*, you know all about West?"

"Most of all," Jim said slowly. "West was prepared to help the corporation, but his loyalties were divided. He had known me all his life, so he tried to save me where he could; but the night he was at the Lazy-K he let the horses go free. There were other indications, among them that he said Howlett had called in the YB and M.M. for a posse but deliberately left out the Lazy-K. That wasn't so. West was supposed to have taken word t'me for members of the posse. He told Howlett I had refused. How-

(Continued On Page 94)

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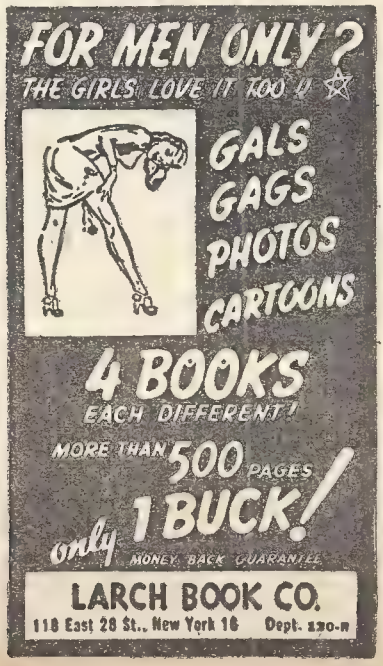

WESTERN ACTION

(Continued From Page 93)

lett had never particularly liked the Lazy-K, and believed it. Thus West started the hostility between Howlett an' me. That's so, Howlett?"

"It's the truth," Howlett said slowly, "an' until now I didn't realize it, Kennedy. I'm apologizin'."

"Yuh needn't," Jim said, and he smiled thinly. "Waal, I guess that's the story. There are two-three other things. When I first located Black he wanted four days, reckoning that would be time enough for him to get Digby back from me. Black started in the first place on his usual small rustlin' tricks, but Diego knew of him, sent him plenty of men—includin' Larsen—and planned to stir up trouble so that Black would get all the blame under cover of the Mid-Texas Corporation. T'my knowledge," added Jim, "there's no law yuh've broken, Conroy. Yuh told Diego t'get yuh this rangeland, an' yuh will claim yuh didn't know what means he would use t'get it. Sorenson did the same kind of thing with ranches in which Digby's father had interests. For the same reason, Digby wanted t'kill him. Mebbe Teemer was the go-between thre, the same as he was to have been herd. But Digby remained obstinately alive, an' yuh were in a hurry."

Conroy said through lips that hardly moved: "There isnt a word of truth in yuhr accusations, Kennedy."

"That's fine," said Jim. "Yuh won' be worried when I testify to findin' the letter to Digby in the court that tries him? I shall tell the whole story then."

Conroy started up, his face purple. "No, Kennedy, no! I can get that trial canceled. I—"

"I wouldn't have that trial canceled fer anythin' in the world," said Johnny Digby, and he was smiling widely.

"Jim, yuh're a crafty old fox, but yuh've got Mid-Texas tied up good an' proper!"

"I swear—" started Conroy, and Teemer cut across his words:

"Kennedy, I didn't plan a thing. I did jus' as I was told! Conroy did arrange all that with me an' Diego!"

"An' so yuh'll hope t'get off at the

frail," Jim said. "That'll be up the court, but I reckon it won't be rigged. Yuh satisfied yuh've got all the men yuh want, Howlett?"

"Yes," said Howlett expressionlessly. "Teemer, an' yuh, Conroy, are under arrest fer the time bein'. Yuh'll be taken to Austin under escort. An' yuh, when yuhr wounds are better, Diego, with Black."

"An' me!" chortled Johnny.

Howlett's eyes gleamed for a mo- with frosty humor, but that soon faded.

HOWLETT planned to take his prisoners into Austin himself, in two days' time. Johnny Digby was allowed bail on his undertaking to surrender himself. With Jim, he stayed at Lecky's saloon, and after a drink with Dando—when the slight wound in Jim's leg had been patched—they went upstairs. Lying full length on the bed, Johnny said: understand at all, Jim. Why'd yuh let West go, if yuh knew what yuh did?"

"Word will reach him," said Jim. "He c'n ride over the border an' for me. An'—he'n me have been friends for a long time."

Johnny nodded soberly.

"I'm followin'. An' then Diego—why did he talk?"

"He cracked when I had that letter read out. With one good hand He would have tried to get away, but he knew he was finished. So he decided to talk; it might help him with the judge."

"Jehoshaphat! I hadn't thought've that."

"Yuh'll learn," Jim said. "An' what else?"

"That letter," said Johnny. "Why did yuh hold out on me for so long with it? It could've cleared me from the start."

Jim said slowly: "Yuh think so? Yuh're wrong, Johnny. The letter itself was.t'yuh, an' brought news yuh'll be glad about. Other interests of yuhr father have recovered considerable value. Yuh're not rich, but yuh're not poor. The man, whoever he was, took it in yuhr name, read it, and then decided to try to get money out of you in exchange for the testimony he

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could give. He was killed, an' concluded yuh were. I worked up a reasonable explanation of the man havin' yuhr letter, an' yuh've heard it t'night. Only—that writing scrawled in red isn't his, Johnny."

Johnny stared. "Then who—"

"I wrote it," Jim said, and he shrugged. "I'll swear it was there when I found it. Conroy and Teemer can't be held on any other evidence, since Diego's word won't be considered good enough on its own."

Johnny said: "I'll eat alligators!"

"That's Dando's private imprecation," smiled Jim. "Waal, that's a chapter over, Johnny. I'm right glad pyuh've settled it all up! An' I'm hopin' yuh'll stay on at the Lazy-K fer a while after the trial. Yuh an' Stella."

"We will," Johnny said. "I want t'work that hire!"

THE END

The Last Bad Man

A True Story

by Rex Whitechurch

DESPITE THE fact that he had a bone-butted gun in a black holster on a wide shell belt the man preached a wonderful sermon. Those who were there at the frame church at Ellsworth, Kansas, that December night, a few days after Christmas expressed their enthusiasm and practically every one of them wanted to shake hands with the sky pilot.

"Never heard anything like it," said Reese Samuels, head of the church board. "This stranger volunteered his services when he learned our regular minister was at home seriously ill with black smallpox. I don't like to draw comparisons, but I'll say this—I never heard a better sermon or a better voice. Ten sinners walked down the aisle and asked to be baptised."

The parson gave his name as Harold Effers and said he was from San Francisco. He'd been a miner and had failed to find anything of value, so had turned his efforts in another direction—that of saving sinners. Deep lines moved in his lean, high cheek-boned face. He was immaculate in black broadcloth. Although he couldn't have been much beyond thirty, he had the air of a man several years older than that, a man of sound judgement and lofty ideals.

Ellsworth, Kansas turned out one hundred percent for the services on the following Sunday.

Standing in the pulpit the minister said, "I understand some of you gentlemen have spent hours in the saddle in quest of the elusive bandit who robbed the Overland

stage, but you didn't find him. Please relax now and listen to this sermon. It is highly appropriate to the occasion."

It was such a glowing sermon that the young sheriff's officer dropped five dollars in the collection box, and walked down the aisle with the other converts.

It was Reverend Harold Effers who sprinkled him with the holy water. While he was dipping his hand in the basin Phil Fisher observed his long pale hands and suddenly rose from his chair.

"Stand back and don't touch me," he shouted. "Here, somebody bring me my gun. This man is a fraud; he's not a minister of the gospel but one of the worst outlaws in the country, Black Bill Jest. Quick—"

The accused smiling slowly, drew his own gun from his holster and handed it to the officer. "Here," he said, "use mine. Yep, you're right, son. Just as right as the Good Book: danged if I haven't converted myself—"

Such was the actual case. Black William Jest, as he called himself, surrendered at the Ellsworth church that morning, in the month of January, 1872. He had behind him a long life of crime, but he'd studied to be a minister of the gospel and this training had pulled him through several precarious places. He'd finally converted himself, as he said, and he went to prison for twenty years. He became an evangelist upon his release and traveled widely doing a great deal of good for his hundreds of converts who believed him when he said that the road of the sinner was a hard one to travel and that no man had ever made a life of crime pay anything in the way of profits, unless he reformed and walked the straight path to and from the church and wherever he chanced to go.

He died in 1901 at Topeka, Kansas.

Young Phil Fisher went on to become a great peace officer and was marshal of Ellsworth and Abilene and took his place beside the other great marshals who rose to fame in the wild west. The reason he'd recognized Black Bill Jest was because of the ruby ring the parson wore on the middle finger of his left hand, a brass ring that had left a tarnished mark above and below the band. You see, Fisher was one of the victims of the holdup. Riding from Saint Joe to Ellsworth in the Concord with two other deputies. They'd gone to Missouri to buy new Colt revolvers.

The reformed bandit's monument said His life was as big a jest as his name. Only He got too serious and influencing in his preaching. He talked himself into a great truth.

Eugene Burgess, writing in the Kansas Statesman, 1889, said: "William Jest, known as Black Bill, was as colorful as Robin Hood. He never stooped to murder but robbed stagecoaches without number. He was a competent authority on the Bible. He had wings on his shoulders and horns on his head. As an evangelist he did a world of good. But the biggest sinner he converted was himself."

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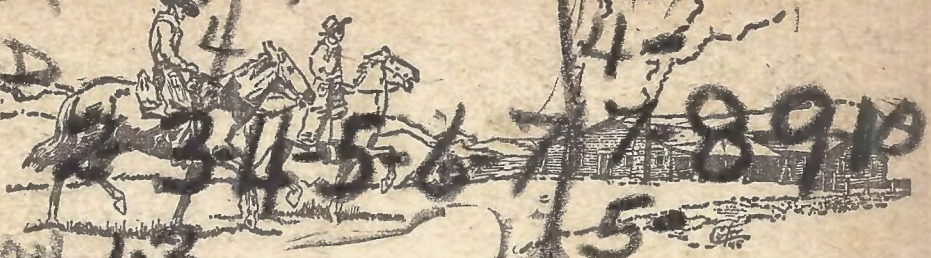

FINIS

By Kacey Sensabaugh

This was the last favor they could do for Dick.

THE THREE punchers looked uncomfortable in the Green Horn saloon for the first time in their careers. Perhaps if they had come here during the circuit rider's previous visits when the Green Horn became the First Methodist church they would not feel so misplaced now. But other times had been optional; now was necessity.

Now they had come to witness the final shattering of their carefree foursome. This was the last honor they could pay their best buddy, Dick. From the look on each face you could read the thoughts behind it.

Speed was just plain mournful; he shifted his long legs nervously and cast doleful looks at those around him. Why did all the women cry? Why did the men dress in moth-ball scented black? Why were the kids restrained even from their natural wriggliness? If Dick was really going to that "better life" enthusiasts preached about, why all the mourning? Speed knew why *he* was mourning; this was the end of a very special friendship.

Bret had the lost look of disillusionment. He was holding Nancy directly responsible for the loss of his friend—dear little Nancy with her ridiculous clothes and bright blonde hair. Nancy with innocent blue eyes and a mind as tricky as a wild stallion. Nancy with the kind of mouth that made even the woman-shy Speed willing to give his bottom dollar for just one kiss. Dang her, anyway! He might have known she was just like all female critters and couldn't be trusted.

Dale was reminiscing. He was the only one of the three who had even the slightest wisp of a smile on his face. The look in his eye was enough to let any observer know that he was unconscious of his present surroundings. He was thinking of the long, dusty drives; of Speed with his battered guitar hugged close while Dick's bell-toned tenor rang out in the quiet night; and of those riotous nights when the drive was over. Dick had been their leader. He had the quickest draw and the sharpest eye. He could drink more liquor with a chorus-girl on each knee than most men could in a lifetime—and not suffer from it later. But then came Nancy. And Nancy was too much for even the fast-talkin', hard-ridin' Dick. Dale was surely going to miss his leader in barroom brawls and black-jack games.

The murmuring ceased suddenly. The three punchers looked up as they brought Dick into the room. Then painfully but dutifully they did the last honor they could for Dick. With Dale in the lead and Speed and Bret following, they escorted Nancy to the front as the strains of the "Wedding March" were pounded out on the battered piano.

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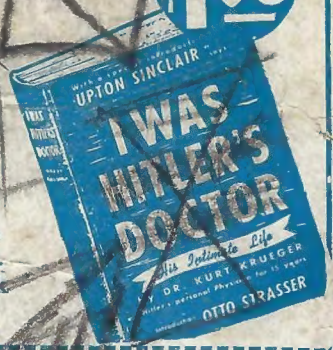

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